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W A N D A

BY
OUIDA

*'Doch!—alles was dazu mich trieb;
Gott!—war so gut, ach, war so lieb!'* Goethe



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

London
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W A N D A.

CHAPTER XI.

ON her return she spoke of her royal friends, of her cousins, of society, of her fears for the peace of Europe, and her doubts as to the strength of the empire; but she did not speak of the one person of whom, beyond all others, Mdme. Otilie was desirous to hear. When some hours had passed, and still she had never alluded to the existence of Sabran, the Princess could bear silence no longer, and casting prudence to the winds, said boldly and with impatience :

‘ And your late guest ? Have you nothing to tell me ? Surely you have seen him ? ’

‘He called once,’ she answered, ‘and I heard him speak at the Chamber.’

‘And was that all?’ cried the Princess, disappointed.

‘He speaks very well in public,’ added Wanda, ‘and he said many tender and grateful things of you, and sent you many messages—such grateful ones that my memory is too clumsy a tray to hold such eggshell china.’

She was angered with herself as she spoke, but the fragrance of the white lilac and the remembrance of its donor pursued her—angered with herself, too, because Hohenszalras seemed for the moment sombre, solitary, still, almost melancholy, wrapped in that winter whiteness and stillness which she had always loved so well.

The next morning she saw all her people, visited her schools and her stables, and tried to persuade herself that she was as contented as ever.

The aurist came from Paris shortly after her, and consoled the Princess by assuring her that the slight deafness she suffered from occasionally was due to cold.

‘Of course!’ she said, with some triumph. ‘These mountains, all this water, rain whenever there is not snow, snow whenever there is not rain; it is a miracle, and the mercy of Heaven,

if one saves any of one's five senses uninjured in a residence here.'

She had her satin hood trebly wadded, and pronounced the aurist a charming person. Herr Greswold in an incautious moment had said to her that deafness was one of the penalties of age and did not depend upon climate. A Paris doctor would not have earned his fee of two hundred napoleons if he had only produced so ungallant a truism. She heard a little worse after his visit, perhaps, but if so, she said that was caused by the additional wadding in her hood. He had told her to use a rose-water syringe, and Herr Greswold was forbidden her presence for a week because he averred that you might as well try to melt the glacier with a lighted pastille.

The aurist gone, life at Hohenzalras resumed its even tenor; and except for the post, the tea-cups, and the kind of dishes served at dinner, hardly differed from what life had been there in the sixteenth century, save that there were no saucy pages playing in the court, and no destriers stamping in the stalls, and no culverins loaded on the bastions.

'It is like living between the illuminated leaves of one of the Hours,' thought the Princess, and though her conscience told her that to dwell so in a holy book like a pressed flower

was the most desirable life that could be granted by Heaven to erring mortality, still she felt it was dull. A little gossip, a little movement, a little rolling of other carriage-wheels than her own, had always seemed desirable to her.

Life here was laid down on broad lines. It was stately, austere, tranquil ; one day was a mirror of all the rest. The Princess fretted for some little *frou-frou* of the world to break its solemn silence.

When Wanda returned from her ride one forenoon she said a little abruptly to her aunt :

‘I suppose you will be glad to hear you have convinced me. I have telegraphed to Ludwig to open and air the house in Vienna ; we will go there for three months. It is, perhaps, time I should be seen at Court.’

‘It is a very sudden decision !’ said Madame Ottilie, doubting that she could hear aright.

‘It is the fruit of your persuasions, dear mother mine ! The only advantage in having houses in half a dozen different places is to be able to go to them without consideration. You think me obstinate, whimsical, barbaric ; the Kaiserin thinks so too. I will endeavour to conquer my stubbornness. We will go to Vienna next week. You will see all your old friends, and I all my old jewels.’

The determination once made, she adhered to it. She had felt a vague annoyance at the constancy and the persistency with which regret for the lost society of Sabran recurred to her. She had attributed it to the solitude in which she lived : that solitude which is the beggetter and the nurse of thought may also be the hotbed of unwise fancies. It was indeed a solitude filled with grave duties, careful labours, high desires and endeavours ; but perhaps, she thought, the world for a while, even in its folly, might be healthier, might preserve her from the undue share which the memory of a stranger had in her musings.

Her people, her lands, her animals, would none of them suffer by a brief absence ; and perhaps there were duties due as well to her position as to her order. She was the only representative of the great Counts of Szalras. With the whimsical ingratitude to fate common to human nature, she thought she would sooner have been obscure, unnoticed, free. Her rank began to drag on her with something like the sense of a chain. She felt that she was growing irritable, fanciful, thankless ; so she ordered the huge old palace in the Herrengasse to be got ready, and sought the world as others sought the cloister.

In a week's time she was installed in Vienna,

with a score of horses, two score of servants, and all the stir and pomp that attend a great establishment in the most aristocratic city of Europe, and she made her first appearance at a ball at the Residenz covered with jewels from head to foot; the wonderful old jewels that for many seasons had lain unseen in their iron coffer—opals given by Rurik, sapphires taken from Kara Mustafa, pearls worn by her people at the wedding of Mary of Burgundy, diamonds that had been old when Maria Theresa had been young.

She had three months of continual homage, of continual flattery, of what others called pleasure, and what none could have denied was splendour. Great nobles laid their heart and homage before her feet, and all the city looked after her for her beauty as she drove her horses round the Ringstrasse. It left her all very cold and unamused and indifferent.

She was impatient to be back at Hohen-szalras, amidst the stillness of the woods, the sound of the waters.

‘You cannot say now that I do not care for the world, because I have forgotten what it was like,’ she observed to her aunt.

‘I wish you cared more,’ said the Princess.
‘Position has its duties.’

‘I never dispute that; only I do not see

that being wearied by society constitutes one of them. I cannot understand why people are so afraid of solitude ; the routine of the world is quite as monotonous.'

'If you only appreciated the homage that you receive——'

'Surely one's mind is something like one's conscience : if one can be not too utterly discontented with what it says one does not need the verdict of others.'

'That is only a more sublime form of vanity. Really, my love, with your extraordinary and unnecessary humility in some things, and your overweening arrogance in others, you would perplex wiser heads than the one I possess.'

'No ; I am sure it is not vanity or arrogance at all ; it may be pride—the sort of pride of the "Rohan je suis." But it is surely better than making one's barometer of the smiles of simpletons.'

'They are not all simpletons.'

'Oh, I know they are not ; but the world in its aggregate is very stupid. All crowds are mindless, the crowd of the Haupt-Allee as well as of the Wurstel-Prater.'

The Haupt-Allee indeed interested her still less than the Wurstel-Prater, and she rejoiced when she set her face homeward and saw the

chill white peaks of the Glöckner arise out of the mists. Yet she was angry with herself for the sense of something missing, something wanting, which still remained with her. The world could not fill it up, nor could all her philosophy or her pride do so either.

The spring was opening in the Tauern, slow coming, veiled in rain, and parting reluctantly with winter, but yet the spring, flinging primroses broadcast through all the woods, and filling the shores of the lakes with hepatica and gentian; the loosened snows were plunging with a hollow thunder into the ravines and the rivers, and the grass was growing green and long on the alps between the glaciers. A pale sweet sunshine was gleaming on the grand old walls of Hohenzalras, and turning to silver and gold all its innumerable casements as she returned, and Donau and Neva leaped in rapture on her.

‘It is well to be at home,’ she said, with a smile, to Herr Greswold, as she passed through the smiling and delighted household down the Rittersaal, which was filled with plants from the hothouses, gardenias and gloxianas, palms and ericas, azaleas and camellias glowing between the stern armoured figures of the knights and the time-darkened oak of their stalls.

‘This came from Paris this morning for Her

Excellency,' said Hubert, as he showed his mistress a gilded boat-shaped basket, filled with tea-roses and orchids; a small card was tied to its handle with '*Willkommen*' written on it.

She coloured a little as she recognised the handwriting of the single word.

How could he have known, she wondered, that she would return home that day? And for the flowers to be so fresh, a messenger must have been sent all the way with them by express speed, and Sabran was poor.

'That is the *Stanhopea tigrina*,' said Herr Greswold, touching one with reverent fingers; 'they are all very rare. It is a welcome worthy of you, my lady.'

'A very extravagant one,' said Wanda von Szalras, with a certain displeasure that mingled with a softened emotion. 'Who brought it?'

'The Marquis de Sabran, by *extra-poste*, himself this morning,' answered Hubert—an answer she did not expect. 'But he would not wait; he would not even take a glass of tokayer, or let his horses stay for a feed of corn.'

'What knight-errantry!' said the Princess well pleased.

'What folly!' said Wanda, but she had the basket of orchids taken to her own octagon room.

It seemed as if he had divined how much of late she had thought of him. She was touched, and yet she was angered a little.

‘Surely she will write to him,’ thought the Princess wistfully very often : but she did not write. To a very proud woman the dawning consciousness of love is always an irritation, an offence, a failure, a weakness : the mistress of Hohenszalras could not quickly pardon herself for taking with pleasure the message of the orchids.

A little while later she received a letter from Olga Brancka. In it she wrote from Paris :

‘Parsifal is doing wonders in the Chamber, that is, he is making Paris talk ; his party will forbid him doing anything else. You certainly worked a miracle. I hear he never plays, never looks at an actress, never does anything wrong, and when a grand heiress was offered to him by her people refused her hand blandly but firmly. What is one to think ? That he washed his soul white in the Szalrassee ?’

It was the subtlest flattery of all, the only flattery to which she would have been accessible, this entire alteration in the current of a man’s whole life ; this change in habit, inclination, temper, and circumstance. If he had approached her its charm would have been weakened, its motive suspected ; but aloof and silent

as he remained, his abandonment of all old ways, his adoption of a sterner and worthier career, moved her with its marked, mute homage of herself.

When she read his discourses in the French papers she felt a glow of triumph, as if she had achieved some personal success; she felt a warmth at her heart as of something near and dear to her, which was doing well and wisely in the sight of men. His cause did not, indeed, as Olga Brancka had said, render tangible, practical, victory impossible for him, but he had the victories of eloquence, of patriotism, of high culture, of pure and noble language, and these blameless laurels seemed to her half of her own gathering.

‘Will you never reward him?’ the Princess ventured to say at last, overcome by her own impatience to rashness. ‘Never? Not even by a word?’

‘Dear mother,’ said Wanda, with a smile which perplexed and baffled the Princess, ‘if your hero wanted reward he would not be the leader of a lost cause. Pray do not suggest to me a doubt of his disinterestedness. You will do him very ill service.’

The Princess was mute, vaguely conscious that she had said something ill-timed or ill-advised.

Time passed on and brought beautiful weather in the month of June, which here in the High Tauern means what April does in the south. Millions of song-birds were shouting in the woods, and thousands of nests were suspended on the high branches of the forest trees, or hidden in the greenery of the undergrowth; water-birds perched and swung in the tall reeds where the brimming streams tumbled; the purple, the white, and the grey herons were all there, and the storks lately flown home from Asia or Africa were settling in bands by the more marshy grounds beside the northern shores of the Szalrassee.

One afternoon she had been riding far and fast, and on her return a telegram from Vienna had been brought to her, sent on from Lienz. Having opened it, she approached her aunt and said with an unsteady voice :

‘ War is declared between France and Prussia ! ’

‘ We expected it ; we are ready for it,’ said the Princess, with all her Teutonic pride in her eyes. ‘ We shall show her that we cannot be insulted with impunity.’

‘ It is a terrible calamity for the world,’ said Wanda, and her face was very pale.

The thought which was present to her was that Sabran would be foremost amidst volun-

teers. She did not hear a word of all the political exultation with which Princess Ottilie continued to make her militant prophecies. She shivered as with cold in the warmth of the midsummer sunset.

‘War is so hideous always,’ she said, remembering what it had cost her house.

The Princess demurred.

‘It is not for me to say otherwise,’ she objected; ‘but without war all the greater virtues would die out. Your race has been always martial. You should be the last to breathe a syllable against what has been the especial glory and distinction of your forefathers. We shall avenge Jena. You should desire it, remembering Aspern and Wagram.’

‘And Sadowa?’ said Wanda, bitterly.

She did not reply further; she tore up the message, which had come from her cousin Kaulnitz. She slept little that night.

In two days the Princess had a brief letter from Sabran. He said: ‘War is declared. It is a blunder which will perhaps cause France the loss of her existence as a nation; if the campaign be long. All the same I shall offer myself. I am not wholly a tyro in military service. I saw bloodshed in Mexico; and I fear the country will sorely need every sword she has.’

Wanda, herself, wrote back to him:

‘You will do right. When a country is invaded every living man on her soil is bound to arm.’

More than that she could not say, for many of her kindred on her grandmother’s side were soldiers of Germany.

But the months which succeeded those months of the ‘Terrible Year,’ written in letters of fire and iron on so many human hearts, were filled with a harassing anxiety to her for the sake of one life that was in perpetual peril. War had been often cruel to her house. As a child she had suffered from the fall of those she loved in the Italian campaign of Austria. Quite recently Sadowa and Königsgrätz had made her heart bleed, beholding her relatives and friends opposed in mortal conflict, and the empire she adored humbled and prostrated. Now she became conscious of a suffering as personal and almost keener. She had at the first, now and then, a hurried line from Sabran, written from the saddle, from the ambulance, beside the bivouac fire, or in the shelter of a barn. He had offered his services, and had been given the command of a volunteer cavalry regiment, all civilians mounted on their own horses, and fighting principally in the Orléanais. His command was congenial to him ; he wrote cheerfully of himself, though hopelessly

of his cause. The Prussians were gaining ground every day. Occasionally, in printed correspondence from the scene of war, she saw his name mentioned by some courageous action or some brilliant skirmish. That was all.

The autumn began to deepen into winter, and complete silence covered all his life. She thought with a great remorse—if he were dead? Perhaps he was dead? Why had she been always so cold to him? She suffered intensely; all the more intensely because it was not a sorrow which she could not confess even to herself. When she ceased altogether to hear anything of or from him, she realised the hold which he had taken on her life.

These months of suspense did more to attach her to him than years of assiduous and ardent homage could have done. She, a daughter of soldiers, had always felt any man almost unmanly who had not received the baptism of fire.

Mdme. Otilie talked of him constantly, wondered frequently if he were wounded, slain, or in prison; she never spoke his name, and dreaded to hear it.

Greswold, who perceived an anxiety in her that he did not dare to allude to, ransacked every journal that was published in German to find some trace of Sabran's name. At the first

he saw often some mention of the Cuirassiers d'Orleans, and of their intrepid Colonel Commandant: some raid, skirmish, or charge in which they had been conspicuous for reckless gallantry. But after the month of November he could find nothing. The whole regiment seemed to have been obliterated from existence.

Winter settled down on Central Austria with cold silence, with roads blocked and mountains impassable. The dumbness, the solitude around her, which she had always loved so well, now grew to her intolerable. It seemed like death.

Paris capitulated. The news reached her at the hour of a violent snowstorm; the postillion of her post-sledge bringing it had his feet frozen.

Though her cousins of Lilienhöhe were amongst those who entered the city as conquerors, the fate of Paris smote her with a heavy blow. She felt as if the cold of the outer world had chilled her very bones, her very soul. The Princess, looking at her, was afraid to rejoice.

On the following day she wrote to her cousin Hugo of Lilienhöhe, who was in Paris with the Imperial Guard. She asked him to inquire for and tell her the fate of a friend, the Marquis de Sabran.

In due time Prince Hugo answered :

‘The gentleman you asked for was one of the most dangerous of our enemies. He commanded a volunteer cavalry regiment, which was almost cut to pieces by the Bavarian horse in an engagement before Orleans. Two or three alone escaped ; their Colonel was severely wounded in the thigh, and had his charger shot dead under him. He was taken prisoner by the Bavarians after a desperate resistance. Whilst he lay on the ground he shot three of our men with his revolver. He was sent to a fortress, I think Ehrenbreitstein, but I will inquire more particularly. I am sorry to think that you have any French friends.’

By-and-by she heard that he had been confined not at Ehrenbreitstein but at a more obscure and distant fortress on the Elbe ; that his wounds had been cured, and that he would shortly be set free like other prisoners of war. In the month of March in effect she received a brief letter from his own hand, gloomy and profoundly dejected.

‘Our plans were betrayed,’ he wrote. ‘We were surprised and surrounded just as we had hobbled our horses and lain down to rest, after being the whole day in the saddle. Bavarian cavalry, outnumbering us four to one, attacked us almost ere we could mount our worn-out

beasts. My poor troopers were cut to pieces. They hunted me down when my charger dropped, and I was made a prisoner. When they could they despatched me to one of their places on the Elbe. I have been here December and January. I am well. I suppose I must be very strong; nothing kills me. They are now about to send me back to the frontier. My beautiful Paris! What a fate! But I forget, I cannot hope for your sympathy; your kinsmen are our conquerors. I know not whether the house I lived in there exists, but if you will write me a word at Romaris, you will be merciful, and show me that you do not utterly despise a lost cause and a vanquished soldier.'

She wrote to him at Romaris, and the paper she wrote on felt her tears. In conclusion she said:

'Whenever you will, come and make sure for yourself that both the Princess Ottilie and I honour courage and heroism none the less because it is companioned by misfortune.'

But he did not come.

She understood why he did not. An infinite pity for him overflowed her heart. His public career interrupted, his country ruined, his future empty, what remained to him? Sometimes she thought, with a blush on her face, though she was all alone: 'I do.' But then, if he never came to hear that?



CHAPTER XII.

THE little hamlet of Romaris, on the coast of Finisterre, was very dull and dark and silent. A few grave peasant women knitted as they walked down the beach or sat at their doors; a few children did the same. Out on the *landes* some cows were driven through the heather and broom; out on the sea some fishing-boats with rough, red sails were rocking to and fro. All was melancholy, silent, poor; life was hard at Romaris for all. The weather-beaten church looked grey and naked on a black rock; the ruins of the old *manoir* faced it amidst sands and surfs; the only thing of beauty was the bay, and that for the folk of Romaris had no beauty; they had seen it kill so many.

There was never any change at Romaris, unless it were a change in the weather, a marriage, a birth, or a death. Therefore the women and children who were knitting had lifted up their heads as a stranger, accompanied by their priest, had come down over the black rocks, on which the church stood, towards the narrow lane that parted the houses where they clustered together face to face on the edge of the shore.

Their priest, an old man much loved by them, came slowly towards them, conversing in low tones with the stranger, who had been young and handsome, and a welcome sight, since a traveller to Romaris always needed a sailing-boat or a rowing-boat, a guide over the moors, or a drive in an ox-waggon through the deep-cut lanes of the country.

But they had ceased to think of such things as these when the curate, with his hands extended as when he blessed them, had said in *bas Breton* as he stood beside them :

‘My children, this is the last of the Sabrans of Romaris, come back to us from the far west that lies in the setting of the sun. Salute him, and show him that in Brittany we do not forget—nay, not in a hundred years.’

Many years had gone by since then, and of the last of the old race, Romaris had scarcely seen more than when he had been hidden

from their sight on the other side of the heaving ocean. Sabran rarely came thither. There was nothing to attract a man who loved the world and who was sought by it, in the stormy sea coast, the strip of sea-lashed oak forest, that one tall tower with its gaunt walls of stone which was all that was left of what had once been the fortress of his race. Now and then they saw him, chiefly when he had heard that there was wild weather on the western coast, and at such times he would go out in their boats to distressed vessels, or steer through churning waters to reach a fishing-smack in trouble, with a wild courage and an almost fierce energy which made him for the moment one of themselves. But such times had been few, and all that Romaris really knew of the last marquis was that he was a gay gentleman away there in distant Paris.

He had been a mere name to them. Now and then he had sent fifty napoleons, or a hundred, to the old priest for such as were poor or sick amongst them. That was all. Now after the war he came hither. Paris had become hateful to him; his political career was ended, at all events for the time; the whole country groaned in anguish; the vices and follies that had accompanied his past life disgusted him in remembrance. He had been

wounded and a prisoner; he had suffered betrayal at unworthy hands; Cochonette had sold him to the Prussians, in revenge of his desertion of her.

He was further removed from the Countess von Szalras than ever. In the crash with which the Second Empire had fallen and sunk out of sight for evermore, his own hopes had gone down like a ship that sinks suddenly in a dark night. All his old associations were broken, half his old friends were dead or ruined; gay châteaux that he had ever been welcome at were smoking ruins or melancholy hospitals; the past had been felled to the ground like the poor avenues of the Bois. It affected him profoundly. As far as he was capable of an impersonal sentiment he loved France, which had been for so many years his home, and which had always seemed to smile at him with indulgent kindness. Her vices, her disgrace, her feebleness, her fall, hurt him with an intense pain that was not altogether selfish, but had in it a nobler indignation, a nobler regret.

When he was released by the Prussians and sent across the frontier, he went at once to this sad sea village of Romaris, to collect as best he might the shattered fragments of his life, which seemed to him as though it had been thrown down by an earthquake. He had resigned his

place as deputy when he had offered his sword to France ; he had now no career, no outlet for ambition, no occupation. Many of his old friends were dead or ruined ; although such moderate means as he possessed were safe, they were too slender to give him any position adequate to his rank. His old life in Paris, even if Paris arose from her tribulations, gay and glorious once more, seemed to him altogether impossible. He had lost taste for those pleasures and distractions which had before the war—or before his sojourn on the Holy Isle—seemed to him the Alpha and Omega of a man's existence. ‘ *Que faire ?* ’ he asked himself wearily again and again. He did not even know whether his rooms in Paris had been destroyed or spared ; a few thousands of francs which he had made by a successful speculation years before, and placed in foreign funds, were all he had to live on. His keen sense told him that the opportunity which might have replaced the Bourbon throne had been lost through fatal hesitation. His own future appeared to him like a blank dead wall that rose up in front of him barring all progress ; he was no longer young enough to select a career and commence it. With passionate self-reproach he lamented all the lost irrevocable years that he had wasted.

Romaris was not a place to cheer a disappointed and dejected soldier who had borne the burning pain of bodily wounds and the intolerable shame of captivity in a hostile land. Its loneliness, its darkness, its storms, its poverty, had nothing in them with which to restore his spirit to hope or his sinews to ambition. In these cold, bleak, windy days of a dreary and joyless spring-time, the dusky moors and the gruesome sea were desolate, without compensating grandeur. The people around him were all taciturn, dull, stupid ; they had not suffered by the war, but they understood that, poor as they were, they would have to bear their share in the burden of the nation's ransom. They barred their doors and counted their hoarded gains in the dark with throbbing hearts, and stole out in the raw, wet, gusty dawns to kneel at the bleeding feet of their Christ. He envied them their faith ; he could not comfort them, they could not comfort him ; they were too far asunder.

The only solace he had was the knowledge that he had done his duty by France, and to the memory of those whose name he bore ; that he had rendered what service he could ; that he had not fled from pain and peril ; that he had at least worn his sword well and blamelessly ; that he had not abandoned his dis-crowned city of pleasure in the day of humili-

ation and martyrdom. The only solace he had was that he felt Wanda von Szalras herself could have commanded him to do no more than he had done in this the Année Terrible.

But, though his character had been purified and strengthened by the baptism of fire, and though his egotism had been destroyed by the endless scenes of suffering and of heroism which he had witnessed, he could not in a year change so greatly that he could be content with the mere barren sense of duty done and honour redeemed. He was deeply and restlessly miserable. He knew not where to turn, either for occupation or for consolation. Time hung on his hands like a wearisome wallet of stones.

When all the habits of life are suddenly rent asunder, they are like a rope cut in two. They may be knotted together clumsily, or they may be thrown altogether aside and a new strand woven, but they will never be the same thing again.

Romaris, with its few wind-tortured trees and its leaden-hued dangerous seas, seemed to him, indeed, a *champ des trépassés*, as it was called, a field of death. The naked, ugly, half-ruined towers, which no ivy shrouded and no broken marble ennobled, as one or the other would have done had it been in England or

in Italy, was a dreary residence for a man who was used to all the elegant and luxurious habits of a man of the world, who was also a lover of art and a collector of choice trifles. His rooms had been the envy of his friends, with all their eighteenth century furniture, and their innumerable and unclassified treasures ; when he had opened his eyes of a morning a pastel of La Tour had smiled at him, rose-coloured windows had made even a grey sky smile. Without, there had been the sound of wheels going down the gay Boulevard Haussmann. All Paris had passed by, tripping and talking, careless and mirthful, beneath his gilded balconies bright with canariensis and volubilis ; and on a little table, heaped in their hundreds, had been cards that bade him to all the best and most agreeable houses, whilst, betwixt them, slipped coyly in many an amorous note, many an unlooked-for declaration, many an eagerly-desired appointment.

‘*Quel beau temps !*’ he thought, as he awoke in the chill, bare, unlively chamber of the old tower by the sea ; and it seemed to him that he must be dreaming : that all the months of the war had been a nightmare ; that if he fully awakened he would find himself once more with the April sunshine shining through the rose glass, and the carriages rolling beneath over the

asphalt road. But it was no nightmare, it was a terrible, ghastly reality to him, as to so many thousands. There were the scars on his breast and his loins where the Prussian steel had hacked and the Prussian shot had pierced him ; there was his sword in a corner all dented, notched, stained ; there was a crowd of hideous ineffaceable tumultuous memories ; it was all true enough, only too true, and he was alone at Romaris, with all his dreams and ambitions faded into thin air, vanished like the blown burst bubbles of a child's sport.

In time to come he might recover power and nerve to recommence his struggle for distinction, but at present it seemed to him that all was over. His imprisonment had shaken and depressed him as nothing else in the trials of war could have done. He had been shut up for months alone, with his own desperation. To a man of high courage and impatient appetite for action there is no injury so great and in its effect so lasting as captivity. Joined to this he had the fever of a strong, and now perfectly hopeless, passion.

Pacing to and fro the brick floor of the tower looking down on the sands and rocks of the coast, his thoughts were incessantly with Wanda von Szalras in her stately ancient house, built so high up amidst the mountains

and walled in by the great forests and the ice slopes of the glaciers. In the heat and stench of carnage he had longed for a breath of that mountain breeze, for a glance from those serene eyes ; he longed for them still.

As he passed to and fro in the wild wintry weather, his heart was sick with hope deferred, with unavailing regret and repentance, with useless longings.

It was near noonday ; there was no sun ; a heavy wrack of cloud was sweeping up from the west ; on the air the odour of rotting fish and of fish-oil, and of sewage trickling uncovered to the beach, were too strong to be driven away by the pungency of the sea.

The sea was high and moaning loud ; the dusk was full of rain ; the wind-tormented trees groaned and seemed to sigh ; their boughs were still scarce in bud though May had come. He felt cold, weary, hopeless. His walk brought no warmth to his veins, and his thoughts none to his heart. The moisture of the air seemed to chill him to the bone, and he went within and mounted the broken granite stairs to his solitary chamber, bare of all save the simplest necessities, gloomy and cheerless with the winds and the bats beating together at the high iron-barred casement. He wearily lighted a little oil lamp,

and threw a log or two of drift-wood on the hearth and set fire to them with a faggot of dried ling.

He dreaded his long lonely evening.

He had set the lamp on a table while he had set fire to the wood ; its light fell palely on a small white square thing. It was a letter. He took it up eagerly ; he, who in Paris had often tossed aside, with a passing glance, the social invitations of the highest personages and the flattering words of the loveliest women.

Here, any letter seemed a friend, and as he took up this his pulse quickened ; he saw that it was sealed with armorial bearings which he knew—a shield bearing three vultures with two knights as supporters, and with the motto '*Gott und mein Schwert ;*' the same arms, the same motto as were borne upon the great red and gold banner floating from the keep on the north winds at the Hohensalrasburg. He opened it with a hand which shook a little and a quick throb of pleasure at his heart. He had scarcely hoped that she would write again to him. The sight of her writing filled him with a boundless joy, the purest he had ever known called forth by the hand of woman.

The letter was brief, grave, kind. As he read he seemed to hear the calm harmonious voice of the lady of Hohensalras speaking to

him in her mellowed and softened German tongue.

She sent him words of consolation, of sympathy, of congratulation, on the course of action he had taken in a time of tribulation, which had been the touchstone of character to so many.

‘Tell me something of Romaris,’ she said in conclusion. ‘I am sure you will grow to care for the place and the people, now that you seek both in the hour of the martyrdom of France. Have you any friends near you? Have you books? How do your days pass? How do you fill up time, which must seem so dull and blank to you after the fierce excitations and the rapid changes of war? Tell me all about your present life, and remember that we at Hohen-szalras know how to honour courage and heroic misfortune.’

He laid the letter down after twice reading it. Life seemed no longer all over for him. He had earned her praise and her sympathy. It was doubtful if years of the most brilliant political successes would have done as much as his adversity, his misadventure, and his daring had done for him in her esteem. She had the blood of twenty generations of warriors in her, and nothing appealed so forcibly to her sympathies and her instincts as the heroism of the sword. Those few lines too were

a permission to write to her. He replied at once, with a gratitude somewhat guardedly expressed, and with details almost wholly impersonal.

She was disappointed that he said so little of himself, but she did justice to the delicacy of the carefully guarded words from a man whose passion appealed to her by its silence, where it would only have alienated her by any eloquence. Of Romaris he said nothing, save that, had Dante ever been upon their coast, he would have added another canto to the 'Purgatorio,' more desolate and more unrelieved in gloom than any other.

'Does he regret Cochonette?' she thought, with a jealous contemptuousness of which she was ashamed as soon as she felt it.

Having once written to her, however, he thought himself privileged to write again, and did so several times. He wrote with ease, grace, and elegance: he wrote as he spoke, which gives this charm to correspondence, that while the letter is read it makes the writer seem close at hand to the reader in intimate communion. The high culture of his mind displayed itself without effort, and he had that ability of polished expression which is in our day too often a neglected one. His letters became welcome to her: she answered them briefly, but

she let him see that they were agreeable to her. There was in them the note of a profound depression, of an unuttered, but suggested hopelessness which touched her. If he had expressed it in plain words, it would not have appealed to her one half so forcibly.

They remained only the letters of a man of culture to a woman capable of comprehending the intellectual movement of the time, but it was because of this limitation that she allowed them. Any show of tenderness would have both alarmed and alienated her. There was no reason after all, she thought, why a frank friendship should not exist between them.

Sometimes she was surprised at herself for having conceded so much, and angry that she had done so. Happily he had the good taste to take no advantage of it. Interesting as his letters were they might have been read from the housetops. With that inconsistency of her sex from which hitherto she had always flattered herself she had been free, she occasionally felt a passing disappointment that they were not more personal as regarded himself. Reticence is a fine quality ; it is the marble of human nature. But sometimes it provokes the impatience that the marble awoke in Pygmalion.

Once only he spoke of his own aims. Then he wrote :

‘ You bade me do good at Romaris. Candidly, I see no way to do it except in saving a crew off a wreck, which is not an occasion that presents itself every week. I cannot benefit these people materially, since I am poor; I cannot benefit them morally, because I have not their faith in the things unseen, and I have not their morality in the things tangible. They are God-fearing, infinitely patient, faithful in their daily lives, and they reproach no one for their hard lot, cast on an iron shore and forced to win their scanty bread at risk of their lives. They do not murmur either at duty or mankind. What should I say to them? I, whose whole life is one restless impatience, one petulant mutiny against circumstance? If I talk with them I only take them what the world always takes into solitude—discontent. It would be a cruel gift, yet my hand is incapable of holding out any other. It is a homely saying that no blood comes out of a stone; so, out of a life saturated with the ironies, the contempt, the disbelief, the frivolous philosophies, the hopeless negations of what we call society, there can be drawn no water of hope and charity, for the well-head—belief—is dried up at its source. Some pretend, indeed, to find in humanity what they deny to exist as deity, but I should be in-

capable of the illogical exchange. It is to deny that the seed sprang from a root; it is to replace a grand and illimitable theism by a finite and vainglorious bathos. Of all the creeds that have debased mankind, the new creed that would centre itself in man seems to me the poorest and the most baseless of all. If humanity be but a *vibrion*, a conglomeration of gases, a mere mould holding chemicals, a mere bundle of phosphorus and carbon? how can it contain the elements of worship; what matter when or how each bubble of it bursts? This is the weakness of all materialism when it attempts to ally itself with duty. It becomes ridiculous. The *carpe diem* of the classic sensualists, the morality of the "Satyricon" or the "Decamerone," are its only natural concomitants and outcome; but as yet it is not honest enough to say this. It affects the soothsayer's long robe, the sacerdotal frown, and is a hypocrite.'

In answer she wrote back to him :

'I do not urge you to have my faith : what is the use? Goethe was right. It is a question between a man and his own heart. No one should venture to intrude there. But taking life even as you do, it is surely a casket of mysteries. May we not trust that at the bottom of it, as at the bottom of Pandora's, there may be hope? I wish again to think with Goethe that immortality

is not an inheritance, but a greatness to be achieved like any other greatness, by courage, self-denial, and purity of purpose—a reward allotted to the just. This is fanciful, may be, but it is not illogical. And without being either a Christian or a Materialist, without beholding either majesty or divinity in humanity, surely the best emotion that our natures know—pity—must be large enough to draw us to console where we can, and sustain where we can, in view of the endless suffering, the continual injustice, the appalling contrasts, with which the world is full. Whether man be the *vibrion* or the heir to immortality, the bundle of carbon or the care of angels, one fact is indisputable: he suffers agonies, mental and physical, that are wholly out of proportion to the brevity of his life, while he is too often weighted from infancy with hereditary maladies, both of body and of character. This is reason enough, I think, for us all to help each other, even though we feel, as you feel, that we are as lost children wandering in a great darkness, with no thread or clue to guide us to the end.'

When Sabran read this answer, he mused to himself:

'Pity! how far would her pity reach? How great offences would it cover? She has

compassion for the evil-doers, but it is easy, since the evil does not touch her. She sits on the high white throne of her honour and purity, and surveys the world with beautiful but serene compassion. If the mud of its miry labyrinths reached and soiled her, would her theories prevail? They are noble, but they are the theories of one who sits in safety behind a gate of ivory and jasper, whilst outside, far below, the bitter tide of the human sea surges and moans too far off, too low down, for its sound to reach within. *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner.* But since she would never understand, how could she ever pardon? There are things that the nature must understand rather than the mind; and her nature is as high, as calm, as pure as the snows of her high hills.'

And then the impulse came over him for a passing moment to tell her what he had never told any living creature; to make confession to her and abide her judgment, even though he should never see her face again. But the impulse shrank and died away before the remembrance of her clear, proud eyes. He could not humiliate himself before her. He would have risked her anger; he could not brave her disdain. Moreover, straight and open ways were not natural to him, though he was physically

brave to folly. There was a subtlety and a reticence in him which were the enemies of candour.

To her he was more frank than to any other because her influence was great on him, and a strong reverence was awakened in him that was touched by a timid fear quite alien to a character naturally contemptuously cynical and essentially proud. But even to her he could not bring himself to be entirely truthful in revelation of his past. Truthfulness is in much a habit, and he had never acquired its habit. When he was most sincere there was always some reserve lying behind it. This was perhaps one of the causes of the attraction he exercised on all women. All women are allured by the shadows and the suggestions of what is but imperfectly revealed. Even on the clear, strong nature of Wanda von Szalras it had its unconscious and intangible charm. She herself was like daylight, but the subtle vague charm of the shadows had their seduction for her. Night holds dreams and passions that fade and flee before the lucid noon, and who at noonday wishes not for night?

For himself, the letters he received from her seemed the only things that bound him to life at all.

The betrayal of him by a base and merce-

nary woman had hurt him more than it was worthy to do ; it had stung his pride and saddened him in this period of adversity with a sense of degradation. He had been sold by a courtesan ; it seemed to him to make him ridiculous as Samson was ridiculous, and he had no gates of Gaza to pull down upon himself and her. He could only be idle, and stare at an unoccupied and valueless future. The summer went on, and he remained at Romaris. An old servant had sent him word that all his possessions were safe in Paris, and his apartments unharmed ; but he felt no inclination to go there : he felt no sympathy with Communists or Versaillists, with Gambetta or Gallifet. He stayed on at the old storm-beaten sea-washed tower, counting his days chiefly by the coming to him of any line from the castle by the lake.

She seemed to understand that and pity it, for each week brought him some tidings.

At midsummer she wrote him word that she was about to be honoured again by a two days' visit of her Imperial friends.

'We shall have, perforce, a large house party,' she said. 'Will you be inclined this time to join it? It is natural that you should sorrow without hope for your country, but the fault of her disasters lies not with you. It is, perhaps, time that you should enter the

world again; will you commence with what for two days only will be worldly—Hohen-szalras? Your old friends the monks will welcome you willingly and lovingly on the Holy Isle?’

He replied with gratitude, but he refused. He did not make any plea or excuse; he thought it best to let the simple denial stand by itself. She would understand it.

‘Do not think, however,’ he wrote, ‘that I am the less profoundly touched by your admirable goodness to a worsted and disarmed combatant in a lost cause.’

‘It is the causes that are lost which are generally the noble ones,’ she said in answer. ‘I do not see why you should deem your life at an end because a sham empire, which you always despised, has fallen to pieces. If it had not perished by a blow from without, it would have crumbled to pieces from its own internal putrefaction.’

‘The visit has passed off very well,’ she continued. ‘Every one was content, which shows their kindness, for these things are all of necessity so much alike that it is difficult to make them entertaining. The weather was fortunately fine, and the old house looked bright. You did rightly not to be present, if you felt festivity out of tone with your thoughts. If,

however, you are ever inclined for another self-imprisonment upon the island, you know that your friends, both at the monastery and at the burg, will be glad to see you, and the monks bid me salute you with affection.'

A message from Mdme. Ottilie, a little news of the horses, a few phrases on the politics of the hour, and the letter was done. But, simple as it was, it seemed to him to be like a ray of sunshine amidst the gloom of his empty chamber.

From her the permission to return to the monastery when he would seemed to say so much. He wrote her back calm and grateful words of congratulation and cordiality; he commenced with the German formality, 'Most High Lady,' and ended them with the equally formal 'devoted and obedient servant;' but it seemed to him as if under that cover of ceremony she must see his heart beating, his blood throbbing; she must know very well, and if knowing, she suffered him to return to the Holy Isle, why then—he was all alone, but he felt the colour rise to his face.

'And I must not go! I must not go!' he thought, and looked at his pistols.

He ought sooner to blow his brains out, and leave a written confession for her.

The hoarse sound of the sea surging amongst

the rocks at the base of the tower was all that stirred the stillness; evening was spreading over all the monotonous inland country; a west wind was blowing and rustling amidst the gorse; a woman led a cow between the dolmen, stopping for it to crop grass here and there; the fishing-boats were far out to sea, hidden under the vapours and the shadows. It was all melancholy, sad-coloured, chill, lonesome. As he leaned against the embrasure of the window and looked down, other familiar scenes, long lost, rose up to his memory. He saw a wide green rolling river, long lines of willows and of larches bending under a steel-hued sky, a vast dim plain stretching away to touch blue mountains, a great solitude, a silence filled at intervals with the pathetic song of the swans, chanting sorrowfully because the nights grew cold, the ice began to gather, the food became scanty, and they were many in number.

‘I must not go!’ he said to himself; ‘I must never see Hohenszalras.’

And he lit his study lamp, and held her letter to it and burnt it. It was his best way to do it honour, to keep it holy. He had the letters of so many worthless women locked in his drawers and caskets in his rooms in Paris. He held himself unworthy to retain hers. He had burned each written by her as it had come to

him, in that sort of exaggeration of respect with which it seemed to him she was most fittingly treated by him. There are less worthy offerings than the first scruple of an unscrupulous life. It is like the first pure drops that fall from a long turbid and dust-choked fountain.

As he walked the next day upon the wind-blown, rock-strewn strip of sand that parted the old oak wood from the sea, he thought restlessly of her in those days of stately ceremony which suited her so well. What did he do here, what chance had he to be remembered by her? He chafed at his absence, yet it seemed to him impossible that he could ever go to her. What had been at first keen calculation with him had now become a finer instinct, was now due to a more delicate sentiment, a truer and loftier emotion. What could he ever look to her if he sought her but a mere base fortune-seeker, a mere liar, with no pride and no manhood in him? And what else was he? he thought, with bitterness, as he paced to and fro the rough strip of beach, with the dusky heaving waves trembling under a cloudy sky, where a red glow told the place of the setting sun.

There were few bolder men living than he, and he was cynical and reckless before many things that most men reverence; but at the thought of her possible scorn he felt himself

tremble like a child. He thought he would rather never see her face again than risk her disdain ; there was in him a vague romantic wishfulness rather to die, so that she might think well of his memory, than live in her love through any baseness that would be unworthy of her.

Sin had always seemed a mere superstitious name to him, and if he had abstained from its coarser forms it had been rather from the revolt of the fine taste of a man of culture than from any principle or persuasion of duty. Men he believed were but ephemera, sporting their small hours, weaving their frail webs, and swept away by the great broom of destiny as spiders by the housewife. In the spineless doctrine of altruism he had had too robust a temperament, too clear a reason, to seek a guide for conduct. He had lived for himself, and had seen no cause to do otherwise. That he had not been more criminal had been due partly to indolence, partly to pride. In his love for Wanda von Szalras, a love with which considerable acrimony had mingled at the first, he yet, through all the envy and the impatience which alloyed it, reached a moral height which he had never touched before. Between her and him a great gulf yawned. He abstained from any effort to pass it. It was the sole act of self-denial of a

selfish life, the sole obedience to conscience in a character which obeyed no moral laws, but was ruled by a divided tyranny of natural instinct and conventional honour.

The long silent hours of thought in the willow-shaded cloisters of the Holy Isle had not been wholly without fruit. He desired, with passion and sincerity, that she should think well of him, but he did not dare to wish for more; love offered from him to her seemed to him as if it would be a kind of blasphemy. He remembered in his far-off childhood, which at times still seemed so near to him, nearer than all that was around him, the vague, awed, wistful reverence with which he had kneeled in solitary hours before the old dim picture of the Madonna with the lamp burning above it, a little golden flame in the midst of the gloom; he remembered so well how his fierce young soul and his ignorant yearning child's heart had gone out in a half-conscious supplication, how it had seemed to him that if he only knelt long enough, prayed well enough, she would come down to him and lay her hands on him. It was all so long ago, yet, when he thought of Wanda von Szalras, something of that same emotion rose up in him, something of the old instinctive worship

awoke in him. In thought he prostrated himself once more whenever the memory of her came to him. He had no religion; she became one to him.

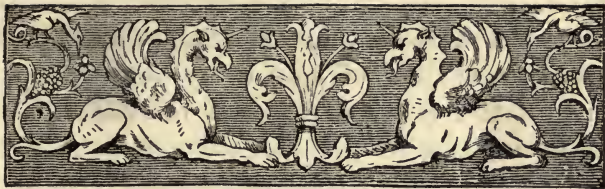
Meanwhile, he was constantly thinking restlessly to himself, 'Did I do ill not to go?'

His bodily life was at Romaris, but his mental life was at Hohenszalras. He was always thinking of her as she would look in those days of the Imperial visit; he could see the stately ceremonies of welcome, the long magnificence of the banquets, the great Rittersaal with cressets of light blazing on its pointed emblazoned roofs; he could see her as she would move down the first quadrille which she would dance with her Kaiser: she would wear her favourite ivory-white velvet most probably, and her wonderful old jewels, and all her orders. She would look as if she had stepped down off a canvas of Velasquez or Vandyck, and she would be a little tired, a little contemptuous, a little indifferent, despite her loyalty; she would be glad, he knew, when the brilliant gathering was broken up, and the old house, and the yew terrace, and the green lake were all once more quiet beneath the rays of the watery moon. She was so unlike other women. She would not care about a

greatness, a compliment, a success more or less. Such triumphs were for the people risen yesterday, not for a Countess von Szalras.

He knew the simplicity of her life and the pride of her temper, and they moved him to the stronger admiration because he knew also that those mere externals which she held in contempt had for him an exaggerated value. He was scarcely conscious himself of how great a share the splendour of her position, united to her great indifference to it, had in the hold she had taken on his imagination and his passions. He did know that there were so much greater nobilities in her that he was vaguely ashamed of the ascendancy which her mere rank took in his thoughts of her. Yet he could not divest her of it, and it seemed to enhance both her bodily and spiritual beauty, as the golden calyx of the lily makes its whiteness seem the whiter by its neighbourhood.





CHAPTER XIII.

IN the Iselthal the summer was more brilliant and warm than usual. The rains were less frequent, and the roses on the great sloping lawns beneath the buttresses and terraces of Hohenszalras were blooming freely.

Their mistress did not for once give them much heed. She rode long and fast through the still summer woods, and came back after nightfall. Her men of business, during their interviews with her, found her attention less perfect, her interest less keen. In stormy days she sat in the library, and read Heine and Schiller often, and all the philosophers and men of science rarely. A great teacher has said that the Humanities must outweigh the Sciences at all times, and he is unquestionably

true, if it were only for the reason that in the sweet wise lore of ages every human heart in pain and perplexity finds a refuge ; whilst in love or in sorrow the sciences seem the poorest and chilliest of mortal vanities that ever strove to measure the universe with a foot-rule.

The Princess watched her with wistful, inquisitive eyes, but dared not name the person of whom they both thought most. Wanda was herself intolerant of the sense of impatience with which she awaited the coming of the sturdy pony that brought the post-bag from Windisch-Matrey. He in his loneliness and emptiness of life on the barren sea-shore of Romaris did not more anxiously await her letters than did the châtelaine of Hohenszalras, amidst all her state, her wealth, and her innumerable occupations, await his. She pitied him intensely ; there was something pathetic to her in the earnestness with which he had striven to amend his ways of life, only to have his whole career shattered by an insensate and unlooked-for national war. She understood that his poverty stood in the path of his ambition, and she divined that his unhappiness had broken that spring of manhood in him which would have enabled him to construct a new career for himself out of the ruins of the old. She understood why he was listless and exhausted.

There were moments when she was inclined to send him some invitation more cordial, some bidding more clear ; but she hesitated to take a step which would bind her in her own honour to so much more. She knew that she ought not to suggest a hope to him to which she was not prepared to give full fruition. And again, how could he respond ? It would be impossible for him to accept. She was one of the great alliances of Europe, and he was without fortune, without career, without a future. Even friendship was only possible whilst they were far asunder.

Two years had gone by since he had come across from the monastery in the green and gold of a summer afternoon. The monks had not forgotten him ; throughout the French war they had prayed for him. When their Prior saw her, he said anxiously sometimes : ‘ And the Markgraf von Sabran, will he never come to us again ? Were we too dull for him ? Will your Excellency remember us to him, if ever you can ? ’ And she had answered with a strange emotion at her heart : ‘ His country is in trouble, holy father ; a good son cannot leave his land in her adversity. No : I do not think he was dull with you ; he was quite happy, I believe. Perhaps he may come again

some day, who knows? He shall be told what you say.'

Then a vision would rise up to her of herself and him, as they would be perhaps when they should be quite old. Perhaps he would retire into this holy retreat of the Augustines, and she would be a grave sombre woman, not gay and pretty and witty, as the Princess was. The picture was gloomy; she chased it away, and galloped her horse long and far through the forests.

The summer had been so brilliant that the autumn which followed was cold and severe, earlier than usual, and heavy storms swept over the Tauern, almost ere the wheat harvest could be reaped. Many days were cheerless and filled only with the sound of incessant rains. In the Pinzgau and the Salzkammergut floods were frequent. The Ache and the Salzach, with all their tributary streams and wide and lonely lakes, were carrying desolation and terror into many parts of the land which in summer they made beautiful. Almost every day brought her some tidings of some misfortunes in the villages on the farms belonging to her in the more distant parts of Austria; a mill washed away, a bridge down, a dam burst, a road destroyed, a harvest swept into the water, some damage or other done by the

swollen river and torrents, she heard of by nearly every communication that her stewards and her lawyers made to her at this season.

‘Our foes the rivers are more insidious than your mighty enemy the salt water,’ she wrote to Romaris. ‘The sea deals open blows, and men know what they must expect if they go out on the vasty deep. But here a little brook that laughed and chirped at noon-day as innocently as a child may become at nightfall or dawn a roaring giant, devouring all that surrounds him. We pay heavily for the glory of our mountain waters.’

These autumn weeks seemed very dreary to her. She visited her horses chafing at inaction in their roomy stalls, and attended to her affairs, and sat in the library or the octagon room hearing the rain beat against the emblazoned leaded panes, and felt the days, and above all the evenings, intolerably dull and melancholy. She had never heeded rain before, or minded the change of season.

One Sunday a messenger rode through the drenching storm, and brought her a telegram from her lawyer in Salzburg. It said: ‘Idrac flooded: many lives lost: great distress: fear town wholly destroyed. Please send instructions.’

The call for action roused her as a trumpet sounding rouses a cavalry charger.

‘Instructions!’ she echoed as she read. ‘They write as if I could bid the Danube subside, or the Drave shrink in its bed!’

She penned a hasty answer.

‘I will go to Idrac myself.’

Then she sent a message also to S. Johann im Wald for a special train to be got in readiness for her, and told one of her women and a trusty servant to be ready to go with her to Vienna in an hour. It was still early in the forenoon.

‘Are you mad?’ cried Madame Ottilie, when she was informed of the intended journey.

Wanda kissed her hand.

‘There is no madness in what I shall do, dear mother, and Bela surely would have gone.’

‘Can you stay the torrents of heaven? Can you arrest a river in its wrath?’

‘No; but lives are often lost because poor people lose their senses in fright. I shall be calmer than anyone there. Besides, the place belongs to us; we are bound to share its danger. If only Egon were not away from Hungary!’

‘But he is away. You have driven him away.’

‘Do not dissuade me, dearest mother. It would be cowardice not to go.’

‘What can women do in such extremities?’

‘But we of Hohenszalras must not be mere women when we are wanted in any danger. Remember Luitgarde von Szalras, the *kuttengeier*.’

The Princess sighed, prayed, even wept, but Wanda was gently inflexible. The Princess could not see why a precious life should be endangered for the sake of a little half barbaric, half Jewish town, which was remarkable for nothing except for shipping timber and selling *salbling*. The population was scarcely Christian, so many Hebrews were there, and so benighted were the Sclavonian poor, who between them made up the two thousand odd souls that peopled Idrac. To send a special messenger there, and to give any quantity of money that the distress of the moment might demand, would be all right and proper; indeed, an obligation on the owner of the little feudal riverside town. But to go! A Countess von Szalras to go in person where not one out of a hundred of the citizens had been properly baptized or confirmed! The Princess could not view this Quixotism in any other light than that of an absolute insanity.

‘Bela lost his life in just such a foolish manner!’ she pleaded.

‘So did the saints, dear mother,’ said his sister, gently.

‘The Princess coloured and coughed.

‘Of course, I am aware that many holy lives have been—have been—what appears to our finite senses wasted,’ she said, with a little asperity. ‘But I am also aware, Wanda, that the duties most neglected are those which lie nearest home and have the least display; consideration for *me* might be better, though less magnificent, than so much heroism for Idrac.’

‘It pains me that you should put it in that light, dearest mother,’ said Wanda, with inexhaustible patience. ‘Were you in any danger I would stay by you first, of course; but you are in none. These poor, forlorn, ignorant, cowardly creatures are in the very greatest. I draw large revenues from the place; I am in honour bound to share its troubles. Pray do not seek to dissuade me. It is a matter not of caprice but of conscience. I shall be in no possible peril myself. I shall go down the river in my own vessel, and I will telegraph to you from every town at which I touch.’

The Princess ceased not to lament, to oppose, to bemoan her own powerlessness to check intolerable follies. Sitting in her easy chair in

her warm blue-room, sipping her chocolate, the woes of a distant little place on the Danube, whose population was chiefly Semitic, were very bearable and altogether failed to appeal to her.

Wanda kissed her, asked her blessing humbly, and took her way in the worst of a blinding storm along the unsafe and precipitous road which went over the hills to Windisch-Matrey.

‘What false sentiment it all is!’ thought the Princess, left alone. ‘She has not seen this town since she was ten years old. She knows that they are nearly all Jews, or quite heathenish Sclavonians. She can do nothing at all—what should a woman do?—and yet she is so full of her conscience that she goes almost to the Iron Gates in quest of a duty in the wettest of weather, while she leaves a man like Egon and a man like Sabran wretched for want of a word! I must say,’ thought the Princess, ‘false sentiment is almost worse than none at all!’

The rains were pouring down from leaden skies, hiding all the sides of the mountains and filling the valleys with masses of vapour. The road was barely passable; the hill torrents dashed across it; the little brooks were swollen to water-courses; the protecting wall on more than one giddy height had been swept away;

the gallop of the horses shook the frail swaying galleries and hurled the loosened stones over the precipice with loud resounding noise. The drive to Matrey and thence with post-horses to S. Johann im Wald, the nearest railway station, was in itself no little peril, but it was accomplished before the day had closed in, and the special train she had ordered being in readiness left at once for Vienna, running through the low portions of the Pinzgau, which were for the most part under water.

All the way was dim and watery, and full of the sound of running or of falling water. The Ache and the Szalsach, both always deep and turbulent rivers, were swollen and boisterous, and swirled and thundered in their rocky beds; in the grand Pass of Lueg the gloom, always great, was dense as at midnight, and when they reached Salzburg the setting sun was bursting through ink-black clouds, and shed a momentary glow as of fire upon the dark sides of the Untersberg, and flamed behind the towers of the great castle on its rocky throne. All travellers know the grandeur of that scene; familiar as it was to her she looked upward at it with awe and pleasure commingled. Salzburg in the evening light needs Salvator Rosa and Rembrandt together to portray it.

The train only paused to take in water; the

station was crowded as usual, set as it is between the frontiers of empire and kingdom, but in the brief interval she saw one whom she recognised amongst the throng, and she felt the colour come into her own face as she did so.

She saw Sabran ; he did not see her. Her train moved out of the station rapidly, to make room for the express from Munich ; the sun dropped down into the ink-black clouds ; the golden and crimson pomp of Untersberg changed to black and grey ; the ivory and amber and crystal of the castle became stone and brick and iron, that frowned sombrely over a city sunk in river-mists and in rain-vapours. She felt angrily that there was an affinity between the landscape and herself ; that so, at sight of him, a light had come into her life which had no reality in fact, prismatic colours baseless as a dream.

She had longed to speak to him ; to stretch out her hand to him ; to say at least how her thoughts and her sympathies had been with him throughout the war. But her carriage was already in full onward movement, and in another moment had passed at high speed out of the station into that grand valley of the Szalzach where Hohensalzburg seems to tower as though Friederich Barbarossa did indeed sleep there. With a sigh she sank backward amongst

her furs and cushions, and saw the soaring fortress pass into the clouds.

The night had now closed in; the rain fell heavily. As the little train, oscillating greatly from its lightness, swung over the iron rails, there was a continual sound of splashing water audible above the noise of the wheels and the throb of the engine. She had often travelled at night and had always slept soundly; this evening she could not sleep. She remained wide awake watching the swaying of the lamp, listening to the shrill shriek of the wheels as they rushed through water where some hillside brook had broken bounds and spread out in a shallow lagoon. The skies were overcast in every direction; the rain was everywhere unceasing; the night seemed to her very long.

She pondered perpetually on his presence at Salzburg, and wondered if he were going to the Holy Isle. Three months had gone by since she had sent him the semi-invitation to her country.

The train sped on; the day dawned; she began to get glimpses of the grand blue river, now grey and ochre-coloured and thick with mud, its turbid waves heaving sullenly under the stormy October skies. She had always loved the great Donau; she knew its cradle well in the north land of the Teutons. She had often

watched the baby-stream rippling over the stones, and felt the charm, as of some magical transformation, as she thought of the same stream stretching broadly under the monastic walls of Klosterneuberg, rolling in tempest by the Iron Gates, and gathering its mighty volume higher and deeper to burst at last into the sunlight of the eastern sea. Amidst the levelled monotony of modern Europe the Danube keeps something of savage grandeur, something of legendary power, something of oriental charm; it is still often tameless, a half-barbaric thing, still a Tamerlane amidst rivers: and yet yonder at its birthplace it is such a slender thread of rippling water! She and Bela had crossed it with bare feet to get forget-me-nots in Taunus, talking together of Chriemhilde and her pilgrimage to the land of the Huns.

The little train swung on steadily through the water above and below, and after a night of no little danger came safely to Vienna as the dawn broke. She went straight to her yacht, which was in readiness off the Lobau, and weighed anchor as the pale and watery morning broadened into day above the shores that had seen Aspern and Wagram. The yacht was a yawl, strongly built and drawing little water, made on purpose for the ascent and descent of the Danube, from Passau up in the north to

as far south as the Bosphorus if needed. The voyage had been of the greatest joys of hers and of Bela's childhood; they had read on deck alternately the 'Nibelungen-Lied' and the 'Arabian Nights,' clinging together in delighted awe as they passed through the darkness of the defile of Kasan.

Idrac was situated between Pesth and Peterwardein, lying low on marshy ground that was covered with willows and intersected by small streams flowing from the interior to the Danube.

The little town gave its name and its seigneurie to the owner of its burg; an ancient place built on a steep rock that rose sheer out of the fast-running waves, and dominated the passage of the stream. The Counts of Idrac had been exceeding powerful in the old times, when they had stopped at their will the right of way of the river; and their appanages with their title had come by marriage into the House of Szalras some four centuries before, and although the dominion over the river was gone, the fortress and the little town and all that appertained thereto still formed a considerable possession; it had usually been given with its Countship to the second son of the Szalras.

Making the passage to Pesth in fourteen

hours, the yacht dropped anchor before the Franz Josef Quai as the first stars came out above the Blocksburg, for by this time the skies had lightened and the rains had ceased. Here she stayed the night perforce, as an accident had occurred to the machinery of the vessel. She did not leave the yacht, but sent into the inner city for stores of provisions and of the local cordial, the *slibowitza*, to distribute to the half-drowned people amongst whom she was about to go. It was noonday before the yawl got under weigh and left the twin-towns behind her. A little way further down the stream they passed a great castle, standing amidst beech woods on a rock that rose up from fields covered with the Carlowitz vine. She looked at it with a sigh: it was the fortress of Kohacs, one of the many possessions of Egon Väsàrhely.

The weather had now cleared, but the skies were overcast, and the plains, which began to spread away monotonously from either shore, were covered with white fog. Soon the fog spread also over the river, and the yacht was compelled to advance cautiously and slowly, so that the voyage was several hours longer than usual. When the light of the next day broke they had come in sight of the flooded districts on their right: the immense flat fields that bore the flax and grain which make the com-

merce of Baja, of Neusatz, and of other riverain towns, were all changed to shallow estuaries. The Theiss, the Drave, and many minor streams, swollen by the long autumnal rains, had burst their boundaries and laid all the country under water for hundreds of square leagues. The granaries, freshly filled with the late abundant harvest, had at many places been flooded or destroyed: thousands of stacks of grain were floating like shapeless, dismasted vessels. Timber and the thatched roofs of the one-storied houses were in many places drifting too, like the flotsam and the hulls of wrecked ships.

There are few scenes more dreary, more sad, more monotonous than those of a flat country swamped by flood: the sky above them was leaden and heavy, the Danube beneath them was turgid and discoloured; the shrill winds whistled through the brakes of willow, the water-birds, frightened, flew from their osier-beds on the islands, the bells of churches and watch-towers tolled dismally.

It was late in the afternoon when she came within sight of her little town on the Slavonian shore, which Ernst von Szalras had fired on August 29, 1526, to save it from the shame of violation by the Turks. Though he had perished, and most of the soldiers and townsfolk with him, the fortress, the *têtes du pont*, and the old

water-gates and walls had been too strong for the flames to devour, and the town had been built up again by the Turks and subsequently by the Hungarians.

The slender minarets of the Ottomans' two mosques still raised themselves amidst the old Gothic architecture of the mediæval buildings, and the straw-covered roofs and the white-plastered walls of the modern houses. As they steamed near it the minarets and the castle towers rose above what looked a world of waters, all else seemed swallowed in the flood; the orchards, which had surrounded all save the river-side of the town, were immersed almost to the summits of their trees. The larger vessels could never approach Idrac in ordinary times, the creek being too shallow on which it stood; but now the water was so high that though it would be too imprudent to anchor there, the yacht easily passed in, and hove-to underneath the water-walls, a pilot taking careful soundings as they steered. It was about three in the afternoon. The short, grey day was near its end; a shout of welcome rose from some people on the walls as they recognised the build and the ensign of the yawl. Some crowded boats were pulling away from the town, laden with fugitives and their goods.

‘How soon people run away ! They are like rats,’ she thought. ‘I would sooner be like the stork, and not quit my nest if it were in flames.’

She landed at the water-stairs of the castle. Men, women, and children came scrambling along the walls, where they were huddled together out of temporary reach of the flood, and threw themselves down at her feet and kissed her skirts with abject servility. They were half mad with terror, and amongst the population there were many hundreds of Jews, the most cowardly people in all the world. The boats were quite inadequate in number to the work they had to do ; the great steamers passing up and down did not pause to help them ; the flood was so general below Pesth that on the right shore of the river each separate village and township was busy with its own case and had no help for neighbours : the only aid came from those on the opposite shore, but that was scanty and unwisely ministered. The chief citizens of Idrac had lost their wits, as she had foreseen they would do. To ring the bells madly night and day, and fire off the old culverins from the water-gate, was all they seemed to know how to do. They told her that many lives had been lost, as the inland waters had risen in the night, and most of the

houses were of only one storey. In the outlying flax-farms it was supposed that whole households had perished. In the town itself there were six feet of water everywhere, and many of the inhabitants were huddled together in the two mosques, which were now granaries, in the towers, and in the fortress itself; but several families had been enabled to escape, and had climbed upon the roofs, clinging to the chimneys for bare life.

Her mere presence brought reviving hope and energy to the primitive population. Their Lady had a romantic legendary reputation amongst them, and they were ready to cling round the pennon of the yacht as their ancestors had rallied round the standard of Ernst von Szalras.

She ascended to the Rittersaal of the fortress, and assembled a few of the men about her, who had the most influence and energy in the little place. She soon introduced some kind of system and method into the efforts made, promised largesse to those who should be the most active, and had the provisions she had brought distributed amongst those who most needed them. The boats of the yawl took many away to a temporary refuge on the opposite shore. Many others were brought in to the state-room of the castle for shelter.

Houses were constantly falling, undermined by the water, and there were dead and wounded to be attended to, as well as the hungry and terrified living creatures. Once before, Idrac had been thus devastated by flood, but it had been far away in the previous century, and the example was too distant to have been a warning to the present generation.

She passed a fatiguing and anxious night. It was impossible to think of sleep with so much misery around. The yacht was obliged to descend the river for safe anchorage, but the boats remained. She went herself, now in one, now in another, to endeavour to inspire the paralysed people with some courage and animation. A little wine, a little bread, were all she took; food was very scarce. The victuals of the yacht's provisioning did not last long amongst so many famishing souls. She ordered her skipper at dawn to go down as far as Neusatz and purchase largely. There were five thousand people, counting those of the neighbourhood, or more, homeless and bereft of all shelter. The telegraph was broken, the poles had been snapped by the force of the water in many places.

With dawn a furious storm gathered and broke, and renewed rains added their quota to the inundation and their discomfort to the ex-

posed sufferers. The cold was great, and the chill that made them shudder from head to foot was past all cure by cordials. She regretted not to have brought Greswold with her. She was indifferent to danger, indefatigable in exertion, and strong as Iibussa, brave as Chriemhilde. Because the place belonged to her in almost a feudal manner, she held herself bound to give her life for it if need be. Bela would have done what she was doing.

Twice or thrice during the two following days she heard the people speak of a stranger who had arrived fifteen hours before her, and had wrought miracles of deliverance. Unless the stories told her were greatly exaggerated, this foreigner had shown a courage and devotion quite unequalled. He had thrown himself into the work at once on his arrival there in a boat from Neusatz, and had toiled night and day, enduring extreme fatigue and running almost every hour some dire peril of his life. He had saved whole families of the poorest and most wretched quarter; he had sprung on to roofs that were splitting and sinking, on to walls that were trembling and tottering, and had borne away in safety men, women, and children, the old, and the sick, and the very animals; he had infused some of his own daring and devotedness into the selfish and

paralysed Hebrew population; priests and rabbis were alike unanimous in his praise, and she, as she heard, felt that he who had fought for France had been here for her sake. They told her that he was now out amongst the more distant orchards and fields, amidst the flooded farms where the danger was even greater than in the town itself. Some Czechs said that he was S. John of Nepomuc himself. She bade them bring him to her, that she might thank him, whenever he should enter the town again, and then thought of him no more.

Her whole mind and feeling were engrossed by the spectacle of a misery that even all her wealth could not do very much to alleviate. The waters as yet showed no sign of abatement. The crash of falling houses sounded heavily ever and again through the gloom. The melancholy sight of humble household things, of drowned cattle, of dead dogs, borne down the discoloured flood out to the Danube renewed itself every hour. The lamentations of the ruined people went up in an almost continuous wail like the moaning of a winter wind. There was nothing grand, nothing picturesque, nothing exciting to redeem the dreariness and the desolation. It was all ugly, miserable, dull. It was more trying than war, which even in its

hideous senselessness lends a kind of brutal intoxication to all whom it surrounds.

She was incessantly occupied and greatly fatigued, so that the time passed without her counting it. She sent a message each day to the Princess at home, and promised to return as soon as the waters had subsided and the peril passed. For the first time in her life she experienced real discomfort, real privation; she had surrendered nearly all the rooms in the burg to the sick people, and food ran short and there was none of good quality, though she knew that supplies would soon come from the steward at Kohacs and by the yacht.

On the fourth day the waters had sunk an inch. As she heard the good tidings she was looking out inland over the waste of grey and yellow flood; a Jewish rabbi was beside her speaking of the exertions of the stranger, in whom the superstitious of the townsfolk saw a saint from heaven.

‘And does no one even know who he is?’ she asked.

‘No one has asked,’ answered the Jew. ‘He has been always out where the peril was greatest.’

‘How came he here?’

‘He came by one of the big steamers that go to Turkey. He pulled himself here in a

little boat that he had bought; the boat in which he has done such good service.'

'What is he like in appearance?'

'He is very tall, very fair, and handsome; I should think he is northern.'

Her pulse beat quicker for a moment; then she rejected the idea as absurd, though indeed, she reflected, she had seen him at Salzburg.

'He must at least be a brave man,' she said quietly. 'If you see him bring him to me that I may thank him. Is he in the town now?'

'No; he is yonder, where the Rathwand farms are, or were; where your Excellency sees those dark, long islands which are not islands at all, but only the summits of cherry orchards. He has carried the people away, carried them down to Peterwardein; and he is now about to try and rescue some cattle which were driven up on to the roof of a tower, poor beasts—that tower to the east there, very far away: it is five miles as the crow flies.'

'I suppose he will come into the town again?'

'He was here last night; he had heard of your Excellency, and asked for her health.'

'Ah! I will see and thank him if he come again.'

But no one that day saw the stranger in Idrac.

The rains fell again and the waters again rose. The maladies which come of damp and of bad exhalations spread amongst the people ; they could not all be taken to other villages or towns, for there was no room for them. She had quinine, wines, good food ordered by the great steamers, but they were not yet arrived. What could be got at Neusatz or Peterwardein the yacht brought, but it was not enough for so many sick and starving people. The air began to grow foetid from the many carcases of animals, though as they floated the vultures from the hills fed on them. She had a vessel turned into a floating hospital, and the most delicate of the sick folk carried to it, and had it anchored off the nearest port. Her patience, her calmness, and her courage did more to revive the sinking hearts of the homeless creatures than the cordials and the food. She was all day long out in her boat, being steered from one spot to another. At night she rested little and passed from one sick bed to another. She had never been so near to hopeless human misery before. At Hohenszalras no one was destitute.

One twilight hour on the ninth day, as she was rowed back to the castle stairs, she passed another boat in which were two lads and a man. The man was rowing, a dusky shadow in the gloom of the wet evening and the un-

couthness of his waterproof pilot's dress ; but she had a lantern beside her, and she flashed its light full on the boat as it passed her. When she reached the burg, she said to her servant Anton : ' Herr von Sabran is in Idrac ; go and say that I desire to see him.'

Anton, who remembered him well, returned in an hour, and said he could neither find him nor hear of him.

All the night long, a cheerless tedious night, with the rain falling without and the storm that was raging in the Bosphorus sending its shrill echoes up the Danube, she sat by the beds of the sick women or paced up and down the dimly-lit Rittersaal in an impatience which it humiliated her to feel. It touched her that he should be here, so silently, so sedulously avoiding her, and doing so much for the people of Idrac, because they were her people. The old misgiving that she had been ungenerous in her treatment of him returned to her. He seemed always to have the finer part—the *beau rôle*. To her, royal in giving, imperious in conduct, it brought a sense of failure, of inferiority. As she read the psalms in Hungarian to the sick Magyar women, her mind perpetually wandered away to him.

She did not see Sabran again, but she heard often of him. The fair stranger, as the people

called him, was always conspicuous wherever the greatest danger was to be encountered. There was always peril in almost every movement where the undermined houses, the tottering walls, the stagnant water, the fever-reeking marshes presented at every turn a perpetual menace to life. 'He is not vainly *un fils des preux*,' she thought, with a thrill of personal pride, as if someone near and dear to her were praised, as she listened to the stories of his intrepidity and his endurance. Whole nights spent in soaked clothes, in half swamped boats; whole days lost in impotent conflict with the ignorance or the poltroonery of an obstinate populace, continual risk encountered without counting its cost to rescue some poor man's sick beast, or pull a cripple from beneath falling beams, or a lad from choking mud; hour on hour of steady laborious rowing, of passage to and fro the sullen river with a freight of moaning, screaming peasantry—this was not child's play, nor had it any of the animation and excitation which in war or in adventure make of danger a strong wine that goes merrily and voluptuously to the head. It was all dull, stupid, unlovely, and he had come to it for her sake. For her sake certainly, though he never approached her; though when Anton at last found and took her message to him he excused

himself from obedience to it by a plea that he was at that moment wet and weary, and had come from a hut where typhoid raged. She understood the excuse; she knew that he knew well she was no more afraid than he of that contagion. She admired him the more for his isolation; in these grey, rainy, tedious, melancholy days his figure seemed to grow into a luminous heroic shape like one of the heroes of the olden time. If he had once seemed to seek a guerdon for it the spell would have been broken. But he never did. She began to believe that such a knight deserved any recompense which she could give.

‘Egon himself could have done no more,’ she said in her own thoughts, and it was the highest praise that she could give to any man, for her Magyar cousin was the embodiment of all martial daring, of all chivalrous ardour, and had led his glittering hussars down on to the French bayonets, as on to the Prussian Krupp guns, with a fury that bore all before it, impetuous and irresistible as a stream of fired naphtha.

On the twelfth morning the river had sunk so much lower that the yacht arriving with medicines and stores of food from Neusatz signalled that she could not enter the creek on which Idrac stood, and waited orders. It had ceased

to rain, but the winds were still strong and the skies heavy. She descended to her boat at the water-gate, and told the men to take her out to the yacht. It was early, the sun behind the clouds had barely climbed above the distant Wallachian woods, and the scene had lost nothing of its melancholy. A man was standing on the water-stairs as she descended them, and turned rapidly away, but she had seen him and stretched out her long staff and touched him lightly.

‘Why do you avoid me?’ she said, as he uncovered his head; ‘my men sought you in all directions; I wished to thank you.’

He bowed low over the hand she held out to him. ‘I ventured to be near at hand to be of use,’ he answered. ‘I was afraid the exposure, and the damp, and all this pestilence would make you ill: you are not ill?’

‘No; I am quite well. I have heard of all your courage and endurance. Idrac owes you a great debt.’

‘I only pay my debt to Hohenszalras.’

They were both silent; a certain constraint was upon them both.

‘How did you know of the inundation? It was unkind of you not to come to me,’ she said, and her voice was unsteady as she spoke. ‘I want so much to tell you, better than letters

can do, all that we felt for you throughout that awful war.'

He turned away slightly with a shudder. 'You are too good. Thousands of men much better than I suffered much more.'

The tears rose to her eyes as she glanced at him. He was looking pale and worn. He had lost the graceful *insouciance* of his earlier manner. He looked grave, weary, melancholy, like a man who had passed through dire disaster, unspeakable pain, and had seen his career snapped in two like a broken wand. But there was about him instead something soldierlike, proven, war-worn, which became him in her eyes, daughter of a race of warriors as she was.

'You have much to tell me, and I have much to hear,' she said, after a pause. 'You should have come to the monastery to be cured of your wounds. Why were you so mistrustful of our friendship?'

He coloured and was silent.

'Indeed,' she said gravely, 'we can honour brave men in the Tauern and in Idrac too. You are very brave. I do not know how to thank you for my people or for myself.'

'Pray do not speak so,' he said, in a very low voice. 'To see you again would be recompense for much worthier things than any I have done.'

‘But you might have seen me long ago,’ she said, with a certain nervousness new to her, ‘had you only chosen to come to the Isle. I asked you twice.’

He looked at her with eyes of longing and pathetic appeal.

‘Do not tempt me,’ he murmured. ‘If I yielded, and if you despised me——’

‘How could I despise one who has so nobly saved the lives of my people?’

‘You would do so.’

He spoke very low: he was silent a little while, then he said very softly:

‘One evening, when we spoke together on the terrace at Hohenszalras, you leant your hand upon the ivy there. I plucked the leaf you touched; you did not see. I had the leaf with me all through the war. It was a talisman. It was like a holy thing. When your cousin’s soldiers stripped me in their ambulance, they took it from me.’

His voice faltered. She listened and was moved to a profound emotion.

‘I will give you something better,’ she said very gravely. He did not ask her what she would give.

She looked away from him awhile, and her face flushed a little. She was thinking of what she would give him; a gift so great that the

world would deem her mad to bestow it, and perhaps would deem him dishonoured to take it.

‘How did you hear of these floods along the Danube?’ she asked him, recovering her wonted composure.

‘I read about them in telegrams in Paris,’ he made answer. ‘I had mustered courage to revisit my poor Paris; all I possess is there. Nothing has been injured; a shell burst quite close by but did not harm my apartments. I went to make arrangements for the sale of my collections, and on the second day that I arrived there I saw the news of the inundations of Idrac and the lower Danubian plains. I remembered the name of the town; I remembered it was yours. I remembered your saying once that where you had feudal rights you had feudal duties, so I came on the chance of being of service.’

‘You have been most devoted to the people.’

‘The people! What should I care though the whole town perished? Do not attribute to me a humanity that is not in my nature.’

‘Be as cynical as you like in words so long as you are heroic in action. I am going out to the yacht; will you come with me?’

He hesitated. ‘I merely came to hear

from the warder of your health. I am going to catch the express steamer at Neusatz; all danger is over.'

'The yacht can take you to Neusatz. Come with me.'

He did not offer more opposition; he accompanied her to the boat and entered it.

The tears were in her eyes. She said nothing more, but she could not forget that scores of her own people here had owed their lives to his intrepidity and patience, and that he had never hesitated to throw his life into the balance when needed. And it had been done for her sake alone. The love of humanity might have been a nobler and purer motive, but it would not have touched her so nearly as the self-abandonment of a man by nature selfish and cold.

In a few moments they were taken to the yawl. He ascended the deck with her.

The tidings the skipper brought, the examination of the stores, the discussion of ways and means, the arrangements for the general relief, were all dull, practical matters that claimed careful attention and thought. She sat in the little cabin that was brave with marqueterie work and blue satin and Dresden mirrors, and made memoranda and calculations, and consulted him, and asked his advice on this, on that.

The government official, sent to make official estimates of the losses in the township, had come on board to salute and take counsel with her. The whole forenoon passed in these details. He wrote, and calculated, and drew up reports for her. No more tender or personal word was spoken between them; but there was a certain charm for them both in this intimate intercourse, even though it took no other shape than the study of how many boatloads of wheat were needed for so many hundred people, of how many florins a day might be passed to the head of each family, of how many of the flooded houses would still be serviceable with restoration, of how many had been entirely destroyed, of how the town would best be rebuilt, and of how the inland rivers could best be restrained in the future.

To rebuild it she estimated that she would have to surrender for five years the revenues from her Galician and Hungarian mines, and she resolved to do it altogether at her own cost. She had no wish to see the town figure in public prints as the object of public subscription.

‘I am sure all my woman friends,’ she said, ‘would kindly make it occasion for a fancy fair or a lottery (with new costumes) in Vienna, but I do not care for that sort of thing, and I can very well do what is needed alone.’

He was silent. He had always known that her riches were great, but he had never realised them as fully as he now did when she spoke of rebuilding an entire town as she might have spoken of building a carriage.

‘You would make a good prime minister,’ she said, smiling; ‘you have the knowledge of a specialist on so many subjects.’

At noon they served her a little plain breakfast of Danubian *salbling*, with Carlowitzer wine and fruit sent by the steward of Mohacs. She bade him join her in it.

‘Had Egon himself been here he could not have done more for Idrac than you have done,’ she said.

‘Is this Prince Egon’s wine?’ he said abruptly, and on hearing that it was so, he set the glass down untasted.

She looked surprised, but she did not ask him his reason, for she divined it. There was an exaggeration in the unspoken hostility more like the days of Arthur and Lancelot than their own, but it did not displease her.

They were both little disposed to converse during their meal; after the dreary and terrible scenes they had been witness of, the atmosphere of life seems grave and dark even to those whom the calamity had not touched. The most care-

less spirit is oppressed by a sense of the precariousness and the cruelty of existence.

When they ascended to the deck the skies were lighter than they had been for many weeks; the fog had cleared, so that, in the distance, the towers of Neusatz and the fortress of Peterwardein were visible; vapour still hung over the vast Hungarian plain, but the Danube was clear and the affluents of it had sunk to their usual level.

‘You really go to-night?’ she said, as they looked down the river.

‘There is no need for me to stay; the town is safe, and you are well, you say. If there be anything I can still do, command me.’

She smiled a little and let her eye meet his for a moment.

‘Well, if I command you to remain then, will you do so as my viceroy? I want to return home; Aunt Ottilie grows daily more anxious, more alarmed, but I cannot leave these poor souls all alone with their priests, and their rabbi, who are all as timid as sheep and as stupid. Will you stay in the castle and govern them, and help them till they recover from their fright? It is much to ask, I know, but you have already done so much for Idrac that I am bold to ask you to do more?’

He coloured with a mingled emotion.

‘You could ask me nothing that I would not do,’ he said in a low tone. ‘I could wish you asked me something harder.’

‘Oh, it will be very hard,’ she said, with an indifference she did not feel. ‘It will be very dull, and you will have no one to speak to that knows anything save how to grow flax and cherries. You will have to talk the Magyar tongue all day, and you will have nothing to eat save *kartoffeln* and *salbling*; and I do not know that I am even right,’ she added, more gravely, ‘to ask you to incur the risks that come from all that soaked ground, which will be damp so long.’

‘The risks that you have borne yourself! Pray do not wound me by any such scruple as that. I shall be glad, I shall be proud, to be for ever so short or so long a time as you command, your representative, your servant.’

‘You are very good.’

‘No.’

His eyes looked at hers with a quick flash, in which all the passion he dared not express was spoken. She averted her glance and continued calmly: ‘You are very good indeed to Idrac. It will be a great assistance and comfort to me to know that you are here. The poor people already love you, and you will write to me and tell me all that may need to be done.’

I will leave you the yacht and Anton. I shall return by land with my woman; and when I reach home I will send you Herr Greswold. He is a good companion, and has a great admiration for you, though he wishes that you had not forsaken the science of botany.'

'It is like all other dissection or vivisection; it spoils the artistic appreciation of the whole. I am yet unsophisticated enough to feel the charm of a bank of violets, of a cliff covered with alpen-roses. I may write to you?'

'You must write to me! It is you who will know all the needs of Idrac. But are you sure that to remain here will not interfere with your own projects, your own wishes, your own duties?'

'I have none. If I had any I would throw them away, with pleasure, to be of use to one of your dogs, to one of your birds.'

She moved from his side a little.

'Look how the sun has come out. I can see the sparkle of the brass on the cannon down yonder at Neusatz. We had better go now. I must see my sick people and then leave as soon as I can. The yacht must take me to Mohacs; from there I will send her back to you.'

'Do as you will. I can have no greater happiness than to obey you.'

'I am sure that I thank you in the way

that you like best, when I say that I believe you.'

She said the words in a very low tone, but so calmly that the calmness of them checked any other words he might have uttered. It was a royal acceptance of a loyal service; nothing more. The boat took them back to the fortress. Whilst she was occupied in her farewell to the sick people, and her instructions to those who attended on them, he, left to himself in the apartment she had made her own, instinctively went to an old harpsichord that stood there and touched the keys. It had a beautiful case, rich with the varnish of the Martins. He played with it awhile for its external beauty, and then let his fingers stray over its limited keyboard. It had still sweetness in it, like the spinet of Hohenszalras. It suited certain pathetic quaint old German airs he knew, and which he half unconsciously reproduced upon it, singing them as he did so in a low tone. The melody, very soft and subdued, suited to the place where death had been so busy and nature so unsparing, and where a resigned exhaustion had now succeeded to the madness of terror, reached the ears of the sick women in the Rittersaal and of Wanda von Szalras seated beside their beds.

.. 'It is like the saints in Heaven sighing in pity for us here,' said one of the women who

was very feeble and old, and she smiled as she heard. The notes, tremulous from age but penetrating in their sweetness, came in slow calm movements of harmony through the stillness of the chamber; his voice, very low also, but clear, ascended with them. Wanda sat quite still, and listened with a strange pleasure. 'He alone,' she thought, 'can make the dumb strings speak.'

It was almost dusk when she descended to the room which she had made her own. In the passages of the castle oil wicks were lighted in the iron lamps and wall sconces, but here it was without any light, and in the gloom she saw the dim outline of his form as he sat by the harpsichord. He had ceased playing; his head was bent down and rested on the instrument; he was lost in thought, and his whole attitude was dejected. He did not hear her approach, and she looked at him some moments, herself unseen. A great tenderness came over her: he was unhappy, and he had been very brave, very generous, very loyal: she felt almost ashamed. She went nearer, and he raised himself abruptly.

'I am going,' she said to him. 'Will you come with me to the yacht?'

He rose, and though it was dusk, and in this chamber so dark that his face was indistinct to her, she was sure that tears had been in his eyes.

‘Your old harpsichord has the vernis Martin,’ he said, with effort. ‘You should not leave it buried here. It has a melody in it too, faint and simple and full of the past, like the smell of dead rose-leaves. Yes, I will have the honour to come with you. I wish there were a full moon. It will be a dark night on the Danube.’

‘My men know the soundings of the river well. As for the harpsichord, you alone have found its voice. It shall go to your rooms in Paris.’

‘You are too good, but I would not take it. Let it go to Hohenzalras.’

‘Why would you not take it?’

‘I would take nothing from you.’

He spoke abruptly, and with some sternness.

‘I think there is such a thing as being too proud?’ she said, with hesitation.

‘Your ancestors would not say so,’ he answered, with an effort; she understood the meaning that underlay the words. He turned away and closed the lid of the harpsichord, where little painted cupids wantoned in a border of metal scroll-work.

All the men and women well enough to stand crowded on the water-stairs to see her departure; little children were held up in their

mother's arms and bidden remember her for evermore ; all feeble creatures lifted up their voices to praise her ; Jew and Christian blessed her ; the water-gate was cumbered with sobbing people, trying to see her face, to kiss her skirt for the last time. She could not be wholly unmoved before that unaffected, irrepressible emotion. Their poor lives were not worth much, but such as they were she, under Heaven, had saved them.

‘ I will return and see you again,’ she said to them, as she made a slow way through the eager crowd. ‘ Thank Heaven, my people, not me. And I leave my friend with you, who did much more for you than I. Respect him and obey him.’

They raised with their thin trembling voices a loud *Eljén!* of homage and promise, and she passed away from their sight into the evening shadows on the wide river.

Sabran accompanied her to the vessel, which was to take her to the town of Mohacs, thence to make her journey home by railway.

‘ I shall not leave until you bid me, even though you should forget to call me all my life!’ he said, as the boat slipped through the dark water.

‘ Such oblivion would be a poor reward.’

‘I have had reward enough. You have called me your friend.’

She was silent. The boat ran through the dusk and the rippling rays of light streaming from the sides of the yacht, and they went on board. He stood a moment with uncovered head before her on the deck, and she gave him her hand.

‘You will come to the Holy Isle?’ she said, as she did so.

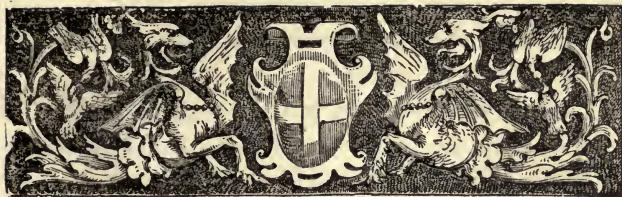
‘If you bid me,’ he said, as he bowed and kissed her hand. His lips trembled as he did so, and by the lamplight she saw that he was very pale.

‘I shall bid you,’ she said, very softly, ‘by-and-by. Farewell!’

He bowed very low once more, then he dropped over the yacht’s side into the boat waiting below; the splash of the oars told her he was gone back to Idrac. The yawl weighed anchor and began to go up the river, a troublesome and tedious passage at all seasons. She sat on deck watching the strong current of the Danube as it rolled on under the bow of the schooner. For more than a league she could see the beacon that burned by the water-gate of the fortress. When the curve of the stream hid it from her eyes she felt a pang

of painful separation, of wistful attachment to the old dreary walls where she had seen so much suffering and so much courage, and where she had learned to read her own heart without any possibility of ignoring its secrets. A smile came on her mouth and a moisture in her eyes as she sat alone in the dark autumn night, while the schooner made her slow ascent through the swell that accompanies the influx of the Drave.





CHAPTER XIV.

IN two days' time Hohenszalras received its mistress home.

She was not in any way harmed by the perils she had encountered, and the chills and fever to which she had been exposed. On the contrary, her eyes had a light and her face had a bloom which for many months had not been there.

The Princess heard a brief sketch of what had passed in almost total silence. She had disapproved strongly, and she said that her disapproval could not change, though a merciful heavenly host had spared her the realisation of her worst fears.

The name of Sabran was not spoken. Wanda was of a most truthful temper, but she could not bring herself to speak of his presence

at Idrac ; the facts would reveal themselves inevitably soon enough.

She sent Greswold to the Danube laden with stores and medicines. She received a letter every morning from her delegate ; but he wrote briefly, and with scrupulous care, the statements of facts connected with the town and reports of what had been done. Her engineer had arrived from the mines by Kremnitz, and the builders estimated that the waters would have subsided and settled enough, if no fresh rising took place, for them to begin the reconstruction of the town with the beginning of the new month. Ague and fever were still very common, and fresh cases were brought in every hour to the hospital in the fortress. He wrote on the arrival of Herr Greswold, that, with her permission, he himself would still stay on, for the people had grown used to him, and having some knowledge of hydraulics he would be interested to see the plans proposed by her engineers for preserving the town from similar calamities.

Three weeks passed ; all that time she spoke but little either of him or of any other subject. She took endless rides, and she sat many hours doing nothing in the white room, absorbed in thought. The Princess, who had learned what had passed, with admirable ex-

ercise of tact and self-restraint made neither suggestion nor innuendo, and accepted the presence of a French Marquis at a little obscure town in Slavonia as if it were the most natural circumstance in the world.

‘All the Szalras have been imperious, arrogant, and of complicated character,’ she thought; ‘she has the same temper, though it is mitigated in her by great natural nobility of disposition and strong purity of motives. She will do as she chooses, let all the world do what it may to change her. If I say a word either way it may take effect in some wholly unforeseen manner that I should regret. It is better to abstain. In doubt do nothing, is the soundest of axioms.’

And Princess Ottilie, who on occasion had the wisdom of the serpent with the sweetness of the dove, preserved a discreet silence, and devoured her really absorbing curiosity in her own heart.

At the end of the fourth week she heard that all was well at Idrac, so far as it could be so in a place almost wholly destroyed. There was no sign of renewed rising of the inland streams. The illness was diminished, almost conquered; the people had begun to take heart and hope, and, being aided, wished to aid themselves. The works for new embankments, water-gates, and streets were already

planned, though they could not be begun until the spring. Meanwhile, strong wooden houses were being erected on dry places, which which could shelter *ad interim* many hundreds of families; the farmers were gradually venturing to return to their flooded lands. The town had suffered grievously and in much irreparably, but it began to resume its trade and its normal life.

She hesitated a whole day when she heard this. Though Sabran did not hint at any desire of his own to leave the place, she knew it was impossible to bid him remain longer, and that a moment of irrevocable decision was come. She hesitated all the day, slept little all the night, then sent him a brief telegram: 'Come to the Island.'

Obeys the summons as rapidly as he might, he could not travel by Vienna and Salzburg more quickly than in some thirty hours or more. The time passed to her in a curious confusion and anxiety. Outwardly she was calm enough; she visited the schools, wrote some letters, and took her usual long ride in the now leafless woods, but at heart she was unquiet and ill at ease, troubled more than by anything else at the force of the desire she felt to meet him once more. It was but a month since they had parted on the deck, and it seemed ten years.

She had known what he had meant when he had said that he would come if she bade him ; she had known that she would only do the sheerest cruelty and treachery if she called him thither only to dismiss him. It had not been a visit of the moment, but all his life that she had consented to take when she had written ‘Come to the Island.’

She would never have written it unless she had been prepared to fulfil all to which it tacitly pledged her. She was incapable of wantonly playing with any passion that moved another, least of all with his. The very difference of their position would have made indecision or coyness in her seem cruelty, humiliation. The decision hurt her curiously with a sense of abdication, mortification, and almost shame. To a very proud woman in whom the senses have never asserted their empire, there is inevitably an emotion of almost shame, of self-surrender, of loss of self-respect, in the first impulses of love. It made her abashed and humiliated to feel the excitation that the mere touch of his hand, the mere gaze of his eyes, had power to cause her. ‘If this be love,’ she thought, ‘no wonder the world is lost for it.’

Do what she would, the time seemed very long ; the two evenings that passed were very tedious and oppressive. The Princess seemed

to observe nothing of what she was perfectly conscious of, and her flute-like voice murmured on in an unending stream of commonplaces to which her niece replied much at random.

In the afternoon of the third day she stood on the terrace looking down the lake and towards the Holy Isle, with an impatience of which she was in turn impatient. She was dressed in white woollen stuff with silver threads in it; she had about her throat an old necklace of the Golden Fleece, of golden shells enamelled, which had been a gift from Charles the Fifth to one of her house; over her shoulders, for the approach of evening was cold, she had thrown a cloak of black Russian sables. She made a figure beautiful, stately, patrician, in keeping with the background of the great donjon tower, and the pinnacled roofs, and the bronze warriors in their Gothic niches.

When she had stood there a few minutes looking down the lake towards the willows of the monastery island, a boat came out from the willow thickets, and came over the mile-and-half of green shadowy water. There was only one person in it. She recognised him whilst he was still far off, and a smile came on her mouth that it was a pity he could not see.

He was a bold man, but his heart stood still with awe of her, and his soul trembled within

him at this supreme moment of his fate. For he believed that she would not have bidden him there unless her hand were ready to hold out destiny to him—the destiny of his maddest, of his sweetest, dreams.

She came forward a few paces to meet him ; her face was grave and pale, but her eyes had a soft suppressed light.

‘I have much for which to thank you,’ she said, as she held out her hand to him. Her voice was tremulous though calm.

He kissed her hand, then stood silent. It seemed to him that there was nothing to say. She knew what he would have said if he had been king, or hero, or meet mate for her. His pulses were beating feverishly, his self-possession was gone, his eyes did not dare to meet hers. He felt as if the green woods, the shining waters, the rain-burdened skies were wheeling round him. That dumbness, that weakness, in a man so facile of eloquence, so hardy and even cynical in courage, touched her to a wondering pitifulness.

‘After all,’ she thought once more, ‘if we love one another what is it to anyone else? We are both free.’

If the gift she would give would be so great that the world would blame him for ac-

cepting it, what would that matter so long as she knew him blameless?

They were both mute: he did not even look at her, and she might have heard the beating of his heart. She looked at him and the colour came back into her face, the smile back upon her mouth.

‘My friend,’ she said very gently, ‘did never you think that I also——’

She paused: it was very hard to her to say what she must say, and he could not help her, dared not help her, to utter it.

They stood thus another moment mute, with the sunset glow upon the shining water, and upon the feudal majesty of the great castle.

Then she looked at him with a straight, clear, noble glance, and with the rich blood mounting in her face, stretched out her hand to him with a royal gesture.

‘They robbed you of your ivy leaf, my cruel Prussian cousins. Will you—take—this—instead?’

Then Heaven itself opened to his eyes. He did not take her hand. He fell at her feet and kissed them.



CHAPTER XV.

‘**I**S it wisest after all to be very unwise, dear mother mine?’ she said a little later, with a smile that was tender and happy.

The Princess looked up quickly, and so looking understood.

‘Oh, my beloved, is it indeed so? Yes, you are wise to listen to your heart; God speaks in it!’

With tears in her eyes she stretched out her pretty hands in solemn benediction.

‘Be His Spirit for ever with you,’ she said with great emotion. ‘I shall be so content to know that I leave you not alone when our Father calls me, for I think your very greatness and dominion, my dear, but make you the more lonely, as sovereigns are, and it is not well to

be alone, Wanda ; it is well to have human love close about us.'

'It is to lean on a reed, perhaps,' murmured Wanda, in that persistent misgiving which possessed her. 'And when the reed breaks, then though it has been so weak before, it becomes of iron, barbed and poisoned.'

'What gloomy thoughts! And you have made me so happy, and surely you are happy yourself?'

'Yes. My reed is in full flower, but—but—yes, I am happy ; I hope that Bela knows.'

The Princess kissed her once again.

'Ah ! he loves you so well.'

'That I am sure of ; yet I might never have known it but for you.'

'I did for the best.'

'I will send him to you. I want to be alone a little. Dear mother, he cares for you as tenderly as though he were your son.'

'I have been his friend always,' said the Princess, with a smile, whilst the tears still stood in her eyes. 'You cannot say so much, Wanda ; you were very harsh.'

'I know it. I will atone to him.'

The eyes of the Princess followed her tenderly.

'And she will make her atonement generously, grandly,' she thought. 'She is a woman

of few protestations, but of fine impulses and of unerring magnanimity. She will be incapable of reminding him that their kingdom is hers. I have done this thing; may Heaven be with it! If she had loved no one, life would have grown so pale, so chill, so monotonous to her; she would have tired of herself, having nothing but herself for contemplation. Solitude has been only grand to her hitherto because she has been young, but as the years rolled on she would have died without ever having lived; now she will live. She may have to bear pains, griefs, infidelities, calamities that she would have escaped; but even so, how much better the summer day, even with the summer storm, than the dull, grey, quiet, windless weather! Of course, if she could have found sanctuary in the Church—— But her faith is not absolute and unwavering enough for that; she has read too many philosophies; she requires, too, open-air and vigorous life; the cloister would have been to her a prison. She is one of those whose religion lies in activity; she will worship God through her children.'

Sabran entered as she mused, and knelt down before her.

'You have been my good angel, always,' he murmured. 'How can I thank you? I

think she would never have let her eyes rest on me but for you.'

The Princess smiled.

'My friend, you are one of those on whom the eyes of women willingly rest, perhaps too willingly. But you—you will have no eyes for any other now? You must deserve my faith in you. Is it not so?'

'Ah, madame,' he answered with deep emotion, 'all words seem so trite and empty; any fool can make phrases, but when I say that my life shall be consecrated to her, I mean it, in the uttermost royalty, the uttermost gratitude.'

'I believe you,' said the Princess, as she laid her hand lightly on his bent head. 'Perhaps no man can understand entirely all that she surrenders in admitting that she loves you; for a proud woman to confess so much of weakness is very hard: but I think you will comprehend her better than any other would. I think you will not force her to pass the door of disillusion; and remember that though she will leave you free as air—for she is not made of that poor stuff which would enslave what it loves—she would not soon forgive too great abuse of freedom. I mean if you were ever—ever unfaithful——'

'For what do you take me?' he cried, with indignant passion. 'Is there another woman in the world who could sit beside her, and not

be dwarfed, paled, killed, as a candle by the sun ? ’

‘ You are only her betrothed,’ said the Princess, with a little sigh. ‘ Men see their wives with different eyes ; so I have been told, at least. Familiarity is no courtier, and time is always cruel.’

‘ Nay, time shall be our dearest friend,’ said Sabran, with a tenderness in his voice that spoke more constancy than a thousand oaths. ‘ She will be beautiful when she is old, as you are ; age will neither alarm nor steal from her ; her bodily beauty is like her spiritual, it is cast in lines too pure and clear not to defy the years. Oh, mother mine ! (let me call you that) fear nothing ; I will love her so well that, all unworthy now, I will grow worthy her, and cause her no moment’s pain that human love can spare her.’

‘ Her people shall be your people, and her God your God,’ murmured the Princess, with her hand still lying lightly on his head, obediently bent.

When late that night he went across the lake the monks were at their midnight orisons ; their voices murmured as one man’s the Latin words of praise and prayer, and made a sound like that of a great sea rolling slowly on a lonely shore.

He believed naught that they believed. Deity was but a phrase to him ; faith and a future life were empty syllables to him. Yet, in the fullness of his joy and the humiliation of his spirit, he felt his heart swell, his pride sink subdued. He knelt down in the hush and twilight of that humble place of prayer, and for the first moment in many years he also praised God.

No one heeded him ; he knelt behind them in the gloom unnoticed ; he rose refreshed as men in barren lands in drought are soothed by hearing the glad fall of welcome rain. He had no place there, and in another hour would have smiled at his own weakness ; but now he remembered nothing except that he, utterly beyond his deserts, was blessed. As the monks rose to their feet and their loud chanting began to vibrate in the air, he went out unheard, as he had entered, and stood on the narrow strip of land that parted the chapel from the lake. The green waters were rolling freshly in under a strong wind, the shadows of coming night were stealing on ; in the south-west a pale yellow moonlight stretched broadly in a light serene as dawn, and against it there rose squarely and darkly with its many turrets the great keep of Hohensalras.

He looked, but it was not of that great pile

and all which it represented and symbolised that he thought now.

It was of the woman he loved as a woman, not as a great possessor of wealth and lands.

‘Almost I wish that she were poor as the saints she resembles!’ he thought, with a tender passion that for the hour was true. It seemed to him that had he seen her standing in her shift in the snow, like our Lady of Hungary, discrowned and homeless, he would have been glad. He was honest with the honesty of passion. It was not the mistress of Hohen-szalras that he loved, but his own wife.

Such a marriage could not do otherwise than arouse by its announcement the most angry amazement, the most indignant protests from all the mighty houses with which for so many centuries the house of Szalras had allied itself. In a few tranquil sentences she made known her intentions to those of her relations whom she felt bound thus to honour; but she gave them clearly to understand that it was a formula of respect not an act of consultation. When they received her letters they knew that her marriage was already quite as irrevocable as though it had already taken place in the Hof-Kapelle of Vienna.

All her relatives and all her order were opposed to her betrothal; a cold sufferance was

the uttermost which any of them extended to Sabran. A foreigner and poor, and, with a troubled and uncertain past behind him, he was bitterly unwelcome to the haughty Prussian, Austrian, and Hungarian nobilities to which she belonged; neither his ancient name nor his recent political brilliancy and military service could place him on an equality with them in their eyes. Her trustees, the Grand Duke of Lilienhöhe and the Cardinal Väsàrhely, with her cousin Kaulnitz, hurried in person as swiftly as special trains could bring them to the Iselthal, but they were too late to avert the blow.

‘It is not a marriage for her,’ said Kaulnitz, angrily.

‘Why not? It is a very old family,’ said the Princess, with no less irritation.

‘But quite decayed, long ruined,’ he returned. ‘This man was himself born in exile.’

‘As they exile everybody twice in every ten years in France!——’

‘And there have been stories——’

‘Of whom are there not stories? Calumny is the parasite of character; the stronger the character the closer to it clings the strangler.’

‘I never heard him accused of any strength, except of the wrist in *l’escrime*!’

‘Do you know anything dishonourable of him? If you do you are bound to say it.’

‘Dishonourable is a grave word. No, I cannot say that I do; the society he frequents is a guarantee against that; but his life has been indifferent, complicated, uncertain, not a life to be allied with that of such a woman as Wanda. My dear Princess, it has been a life *dans le milieu parisien*; what more would you have me say?’

‘Prince Archambaud’s has been that. Yet three years since you earnestly pressed his suit on Wanda.’

‘Archambaud! He is one of the first alliances in Europe; he is of blood royal, and he has not been more vicious than other men.’

‘It would be better he should have been less so, since he lives so near “the fierce light that beats upon the throne;” an electric light which blackens while it illumines! My good Kaulnitz, you wander very far afield. If you know anything serious against M. de Sabran it is your duty to say it.’

‘He is a gambler.’

‘He has renounced gambling.’

‘He is a duellist.’

‘Society was of much better constitution when the duel was its habitual phlebotomy.’

‘He has been the lover of many women.’

‘I am afraid that is nothing singular.’

‘He is hardly more than an adventurer.’

‘He counts his ancestry in unbroken succession from the days of Dagobert.

‘He has nothing but a *pignon sur rue* in Paris, and a league or two of rocks and sand in Brittany; yet, though so poor, he made money enough by cards and speculation to be for three years the *amant en titre* of Cochonette.’

Madame Ottilie rose with a little frown.

‘I think we will say no more, my dear Baron; the matter is, after all, not yours or mine to decide. Wanda will assuredly do as she likes.’

‘But you have so much influence with her.’

‘I have none; no one has any: and I think you do not understand her in the least. It may cost her very much to avow to him that she loves him, but once having done that, it will cost her nothing at all to avow it to the world. She is much too proud a woman to care for the world.’

‘He is *gentilhomme de race*, I grant,’ admitted with reluctance the Grand Duke of Lilienhöhe.

‘When has a noble of Brittany been otherwise?’ asked the Princess Ottilie.

‘I know,’ said the Prince; ‘but you will admit that he occupies a difficult position—an invidious one.’

‘And he carries himself well through it. It is a difficult position which is the test of breeding,’ said the Princess, triumphantly, ‘and I deny entirely that it is what you call an invidious one. It is you who have the idea of the crowd when you lay so much stress on the mere absence of money.’

‘It is the idea of the crowd that dominates in this age.’

‘The more reason for us to resist it, if it be so.’

‘I think you are in love with him yourself, my sister!’

‘I should be were I forty years younger.’

The Countess Brancka alone wrote with any sort of sympathy and pleasure to congratulate them both.

‘I was sure that Parsifal would win soon or late,’ she said. ‘Only remember that he is a Parsifal *doublé* by a de Morny.’

Wanda read that line with contracted brows. It angered her more than the outspoken remonstrances of the Väsàrhely, of the Lilienhöhe, of the Kaulnitz, of the many great families to whom she was allied. De Morny!—a bastard, an intriguer, a speculator, a debaucher! The comparison had an evil insinuation, and displeased her.

She was not a woman, however, likely either

for insinuation or remonstrance to change her decisions or abandon her wishes. She had so much of the '*éternel féminin*' in her that she was only the more resolved in her own course because others, by evil prophecy and exaggerated fears, sought to turn her from it. What they said was natural, she granted, but it was unjust and would be unjustified. All the expostulation, diplomatically hinted or stoutly outspoken, of those who considered that they had the right to make such remonstrances produced not the smallest effect upon the mind of the woman whom, as Baron Kaulnitz angrily expressed it, Sabran had magnetised. Once again Love was a magician, against whom wisdom, prudence, and friendship had no power of persuasion.

The melancholy that she observed in him seemed to her only the more graceful; there was no vulgar triumph in his own victory, such as might have suggested that the material advantages of that triumph were present to him. That he loved her greatly she could not doubt, and that he had striven to conceal it from her she could not doubt either. The sadness which at times overcame him was but natural in a proud man, whose fortunes were unequal to his birth, and who was also sensible of many brilliant gifts, intellectual, that he had wasted,

which, had they been fully utilised, would have justified his aspiration to her hand.

‘Try and persuade him,’ she said to Mdme. Ottilie, ‘to think less of this mere accident of difference between us. If it were difference of birth it might be insurmountable or intolerably painful; but a mere difference of riches matters no more than the colour of one’s eyes, or the inches of one’s stature.’

The Princess shook her head.

‘If he did not feel it as he does, he would not be the man that he is. A marriage contract to which the lover brings nothing must always be humiliating to himself. Besides, it seems to him that the world at large must condemn him as a mere fortune-hunter.’

‘Since I am convinced of the honesty and purity of his motives, what matters the opinion of others?’

‘How can he tell that the world may not some day induce you to doubt those motives?’

Wanda did not reply.

‘But he will cease to think of any disparity when all that is mine has been his a year or two,’ she thought. ‘All the people shall look to him as their lord, since he will be mine; even if I think differently to him on any matter I will not say it, lest I should remind

him that the power lies with me; he shall be no prince consort, he shall be king.'

As the generous resolve passed dreamily through her mind she was listening to the Coronation Mass of Liszt, as he played it on the organ within. It sounded to her like the hymn of the future; a chorus of grave and glorious voices shouting welcome to the serene and joyous years to come.

When she was next alone with him she said to him very tenderly:

'I want you to promise me one thing.'

'I promise you all things. What is this one?'

'It is this: you are troubled at the thought that I have one of those great fortunes which form the *acte d'accusation* of socialists against society, and that you have lost all except the rocks and salt beach of Romaris. Now I want you to promise me never to think of this fact. It is beneath you. Fortune is so precarious a thing, so easily destroyed by war or revolution, that it is not worth contemplation as a serious barrier between human beings. A treachery, a sin, even a lie, any one of those may be a wall of adamant, but a mere fortune!—Promise me that you will never think of mine, except inasmuch, my beloved, as it may enhance my happiness by ministering to yours.'

He had grown very pale as she spoke, and his lips had twice parted to speak without words coming from them. When she had ceased he still remained silent.

‘I do not like the world to come between us, even in a memory ; it is too much flattery to it,’ she continued. ‘Surely it is treason against me to be troubled by what a few silly persons will or will not say in a few salons ? You have too little vanity, I think, where others have too much !’

He stooped and kissed her hand.

‘Could any man live and fail to be humble before you ?’ he said with passionate tenderness. ‘Yes, the world will say, and say rightly, that I have done a base thing, and I cannot forget that the world will be right ; yet since you honour me with your divine pity, can I turn away from it ? Could a dying man refuse a draught of the water of life ?’

A great agitation mastered him for the moment. He hid his face upon her hands as he held them clasped in his.

‘We will drink that water together, and as long as we are together it will never be bitter, I think,’ she said very softly.

Her voice seemed to sink into his very soul, so much it said of faith, so much it aroused of remorse.

Then the great joy which had entered his life, like a great dazzling flood of light suddenly let loose into a darkened chamber, so blinded, consumed, and intoxicated him, that he forgot all else ; all else save this one fact—she would be his, body and soul, night and day, in life and in death for ever ; his children borne by her, his life spent with her, her whole existence surrendered to him.

For some days after that she mused upon the possibility of rendering him entirely independent of herself, without insulting him by a direct offer of a share in her possessions. At last a solution occurred to her. The whole of the fiefs of Idrac constituted a considerable appanage apart ; its title went with it. When it had come into the Szalras family by marriage, as far back as the fifteenth century, it had been a principality ; it was still a seigneurie, and many curious feudal privileges and distinctions went with it.

It was Idrac now that she determined to abandon to her lover.

‘He will be seigneur of Idrac,’ she thought, ‘and I shall be so glad for him to bear an Austrian name.’

‘She herself would always retain her own name, and would take no other.’

‘We will go and revisit it together,’ she

thought, and though she was all alone at that moment, a soft warmth came into her face, and a throb of emotion to her heart, as she remembered all that would lie in that one word 'together,' all the tender and intimate union of the years to come.

Her trustees were furious, and sought the aid of the men of law to enable them to step in and arrest her in what they deemed a course of self-destruction, but the law could not give them so much power ; she was her own mistress, and as sole inheritrix had received her possessions singularly untrammelled by restrictions. In vain Prince Lilienhöhe spent his severe and chilly anger, Kaulnitz his fine sarcasm and delicate insinuations, and the Cardinal his stately and authoritative wrath. She was not to be altered in her decision.

Austrian law allowed her to give away an estate to her husband if she chose, and there was nothing in the private settlements of her property to prevent her availing herself of the law.

Strenuous opposition was encountered by her to this project, by every one of her relatives, hardly excluding the Princess Ottilie ; 'for,' said that sagacious recluse, 'your horses may show you, my dear, the dangers of a rein too loose.'

'I want no rein at all,' said Wanda. 'You

forget that, to my thinking, marriage should never be bondage; two people with independent wills, tastes, and habits should mutually concede a perfect independence of action to each other. When one must yield, it must be the woman.'

'Those are very fine theories,' the Princess remarked with caution.

'I hope we shall put them in practice,' said Wanda, with unruffled good humour. 'Dear mother, I am sure you can understand that I want him to feel he is wholly independent of me. To what I love best on earth shall I dole out a niggard largesse from my wealth? If I were capable of doing so he would grow in time to hate me, and his hatred would be justified.'

'I never should have supposed you would become so romantic,' said the Princess.

'It will make him independent of you,' objected Prince Lilienhöhe.

'That is what, beyond all, I desire him to be,' she answered.

'It is an infatuation,' sighed Cardinal Väsàrhely, out of her hearing, 'when Egon would have brought to her a fortune as large as her own.'

'You think water should always run to the sea,' said Princess Ottilie; 'surely that is great waste sometimes?'

‘I think you are as infatuated as she is,’ murmured the Cardinal. ‘You forget that had she not been inspired with this unhappy sentiment she would have most probably left Hohenzalras to the Church.’

‘She would have done nothing of the kind. Your Eminence mistakes,’ answered Madame Ottilie, sharply. ‘Hohenzalras and everything else, had she died unmarried, would have certainly gone to the Habsburgs.’

‘That would have been better than to an adventurer.’

‘How can you call a Breton noble an adventurer? It is one of the purest aristocracies of the world, if poor.’

‘*Ce que femme veut,*’ sighed his Eminence, who knew how often even the Church had been worsted by women.

The Countess von Szalras had her way, and although when the marriage-deeds were drawn up they all set aside completely any possibility of authority or of interference on the part of her husband, and maintained in the clearest and firmest manner her entire liberty of action and enjoyment of inalienable properties and powers, she had the deed of gift of Idrac locked up in her cabinet, and thought to herself, as the long dreary preamble and provisions of the law were read aloud to

her, 'So will he be always his own master. What pleasure that your hawk stays by you if you chain him to your wrist? If he love you he will sail back uncalled from the longest flight. I think mine always will. If not—if not—well, he must go!'

One morning she came to him with a great roll of yellow parchment emblazoned and with huge seals bearing heraldic arms and crowns. She spread it out before him as they stood alone in the Rittersaal. He looked scarcely at it, always at her. She wore a gown of old gold plush that gleamed and glowed as she moved, and she had a knot of yellow tea-roses at her breast, fastened in with a little dagger of sapphires. She had never looked more truly a great lady, more like a châtelaine of the Renaissance, as she spread out the great roll of parchment before him on one of the tables of the knights' hall.

'Look!' she said to him. 'I had the lawyers bring this over for you to see. It is the deed by which Stephen, first Christian King of Hungary, confirmed to the Counts of Idrac in the year 1001 all their feudal rights to that town and district, as a fief. They had been lords there long before. Look at it; here, farther down you see is the reconfirmation of the charter under the Habsburg seal, when Hungary passed

to them; but you do not attend, where are your eyes?’

‘On you! Carolus Duran must paint you again in that dead gold with those roses.’

‘They are only hothouse roses; who cares for them? I love no forced flowers either in nature or humanity. Come, study this old parchment. It must have some interest for you. It is what makes you lord of Idrac.’

‘What have I to do with Idrac? It is one of the many jewels of your coronet, to which I can add none!’

But to please her he bent over the crabbed black letter and the antique blazonings of the great roll to which the great dead men had set their sign and seal. She watched him as he read it, then after a little time she put her hand with a caressing movement on his shoulder.

‘My love, I can do just as I will with Idrac. The lawyers are agreed on that, and the Kaiser will confirm whatever I do. Now I want to give you Idrac, make you wholly lord of it; indeed, the thing is already done. I have signed all the documents needful, and, as I say, the Emperor will confirm any part of them that needs his assent. My René, you are a very proud man, but you will not be too proud to take Idrac and its title from your wife. But for that town who can say that our lives might

not have been passed for ever apart? Why do you look so grave? The Kaiser and I both want you to be Austrian. When I transfer to you the fief of Idrac you are its Count for evermore.'

He drew a quick deep breath as if he had been struck a blow, and stood gazing at her. He did not speak, his eyes darkened as with pain. For the moment she was afraid that she had wounded him. With exquisite softness of tone and touch she took his hand and said to him tenderly :

'Why will you be so proud? After all, what are these things? Since we love one another, what is mine is yours ; a formula more or less is no offence. It is my fancy that you should have the title and the fief. The people know you there, and your heroic courage will be for ever amongst their best traditions. Dear! once I read that it needs a greater soul to take generously than to give. Be great so, now, for my sake!'

'Great !' he echoed the word hoarsely, and a smile of bitter irony passed for a moment over his features. But he controlled the passionate self-contempt that rose in him. He knew that whatever else he was, he was her lover, and her hero in her sight. If the magnitude and magnanimity of her gifts overwhelmed and oppressed him, he was recalled to self-control by the sense

of her absolute faith in him. He pressed her hands against his heavily-beating heart.

‘All the greatness is with you, my beloved,’ he said with effort. ‘Since you delight to honour me, I can but strive my utmost to deserve your honour. It is like your beautiful and lavish nature to be prodigal of gifts. But when you give yourself, what need is there for aught else?’

‘But Idrac is my caprice. You must gratify it.’

‘I will take the title gladly at your hands then. ‘The revenues—No.’

‘You must take it all, the town and the title, and all they bring,’ she insisted. ‘In truth, but for you there would possibly be no town at all. Nay, my dear, you must do me this little pleasure; it will become you so well that Countship of Idrac: it is as old a place as Vindobona itself.’

‘Do you not understand?’ she added, with a flush on her face. ‘I want you to feel that it is wholly yours; that if I die, or if you leave me, it remains yours still. Oh, I do not doubt you; not for one moment. But liberty is always good. And Idrac will make you an Austrian noble in your own right. If you persist in refusing it I will assign it to the Crown; you will pain me and mortify me.’

‘That is enough ! Never wittingly in my life will I hurt you. But if you wish me to be lord of Idrac, invest me with the title, my Empress. I will take it and be proud of it ; and as for the revenues—well, we will not quarrel for them. They shall go to make new dykes and new bastions for the town, or pile themselves one on another in waiting for your children.’

She smiled and her face grew warm as she turned aside and took up one of the great swords with jewelled hilts and damascened scabbards, which were ranged along the wall of the Rittersaal with other stands of arms.

She drew the sword, and as he fell on his knee before her smote him lightly on the shoulder with its blade.

‘Rise, Graf von Idrac !’ she said, stooping and touching his forehead with the bouquet that she wore at her breast. He loosened one of the roses and held it to his lips.

‘I swear my fealty now and for ever,’ he said with emotion, and his face was paler and his tone was graver than the playfulness of the moment seemed to call for in him.

‘Would to Heaven I had had no other name than this one you give me,’ he murmured as he rose. ‘Oh, my love, my lady, my guardian angel ! Forget that ever I lived before, forget all my life when I was unworthy you ; let me

live only from the day that will make me your vassal and your——’

‘That will make you my lord!’ she said softly; then she stooped, and for the first time kissed him.

What caused her the only pain that disturbed the tranquillity of these cloudless days was the refusal of her cousin Egon to be present at her marriage. He sent her, with some great jewels that had come from Persia, a few words of sad and wistful affection.

‘My presence,’ he added in conclusion, ‘is no more needed for your happiness than are these poor diamonds and pearls needed in your crowded jewel-cases. You will spare me a trial, which it could be of no benefit to you for me to suffer. I pray that the Marquis de Sabran may all his life be worthy of the immense trust and honour which you have seen fit to give to him. For myself, I have been very little always in your life. Henceforth I shall be nothing. But if ever you call on me for any service—which it is most unlikely you ever will do—I entreat you to remember that there is no one living who will more gladly or more humbly do your bidding at all cost than I, your cousin Egon.’

The short letter brought tears to her eyes. She said nothing of it to Sabran. He had

understood from Mdme. Ottilie that Prince Väsàrhely had loved his cousin hopelessly for many years, and could not be expected to be present at her marriage.

In a week from that time their nuptials were celebrated in the Court Chapel of the Hofburg at Vienna, with all the pomp and splendour that a brilliant and ceremonious Court could lend to the espousal of one of the greatest ladies of the old Duchy of Austria.

Immediately after the ceremony they left the capital for Hohenszalras.

At the signing of the contract on the previous night, when he had taken up the pen he had grown very pale; he had hesitated a moment, and glanced around him on the magnificent crowd, headed by the Emperor and Empress, with a gleam of fear and of anxiety in his eyes, which Baron Kaulnitz, who was intently watching him, had alone perceived.

‘There is something. What is it?’ had mused the astute German.

It was too late to seek to know. Sabran had bent down over the parchment, and with a firm hand had signed his name and title.



CHAPTER XVI.

IT was midsummer once more in the Iselthal, five years and a half after the celebration at the Imperial palace of those nuptials which had been so splendid that their magnificence had been noticeable even at that magnificent Court. The time had seemed to her like one long, happy, cloudless day, and if to him there had come any fatigue, any satiety, any unrest, such as almost always come to the man in the fruition of his passion, he suffered her to see none of them.

It was one of those rare marriages in which no gall of a chain is felt, but a quick and perfect sympathy insures that harmony which passion alone is insufficient to sustain. He devoted himself with ardour to the care of the im-

mense properties that belonged to his wife ; he brought to their administration a judgment and a precision that none had looked for in a man of pleasure ; he entered cordially into all her schemes for the well-being of her people dependent on her, and carried them out with skill and firmness. The revenues of Idrac he never touched ; he left them to accumulate for his younger son, or expended them on the township itself, where he was adored.

If he were still the same man who had been the lover of Cochonette, the terror of Monte Carlo, the hero of night-long baccara and frontier duels, he had at least so banished the old Adam that it appeared wholly dead. Nor was the death of it feigned. He had flung away the slough of his old life with a firm hand, and the peace, the dignity of his present existence were very precious to him. He was glad to steep himself in them, as a tired and fevered wayfarer was glad to bathe his dusty and heated limbs in the cool, clear waters of the Szalrassee. And he loved his wife with a great love, in which reverence, and gratitude, and passion were all blent. Possession had not dulled, nor familiarity blunted it. She was still to him a sovereign, a saint, a half divine creature, who had stooped to become mortal for his sake, and his children's.

The roses were all aglow on the long lawns and under the grey walls and terraces; the sunbeams were dancing on the emerald surface of the Szalrassee.

‘What a long spell of fair weather,’ said Sabran, as they sat beneath the great yews beside the keep.

‘It is like our life,’ said his wife, who was doing nothing but watching the clouds circle round the domes and peaks, which, white as ivory, dazzling and clear, towered upward in the blue air like a mighty amphitheatre.

She had borne him three children in these happy years, the eldest of whom, Bela, played amidst the daisies at her feet, a beautiful fair boy with his father’s features and his father’s luminous blue eyes. The other two, Gela and the little Otilie, who had seen but a few months of life, were asleep within doors in their carved ivory cots. They were all handsome, vigorous, and of perfect promise.

‘Have I deserved to be so happy?’ she would often think, she whom the world called so proud.

‘Bela grows so like you!’ she said now to his father, who stood near her wicker chair.

‘Does he?’ said Sabran, with a quick glance that had some pain in it, at the little face of his son. ‘Then if the other one be

more like you it will be he who will be dearest to me.'

As he spoke he bowed his head down and kissed her hand.

She smiled gravely and sweetly in his eyes.

'That will be our only difference, I think! It is time, perhaps, that we began to have one. Do you think there are two other people in all the world who have passed five years and more together without once disagreeing?'

'In all the world there is not another Countess Wanda!'

'Ah! that is your only defect; you will always avoid argument by escaping through the side-door of compliment. It is true, to be sure, that your flattery is a very high and subtle art.'

'It is like all high art then, based on what is eternally true.'

'You will always have the last word, and it is always so graceful a one that it is impossible to quarrel with it. But, René, I want you to speak without compliment to me for once. Tell me, are you indeed never—never—a little weary of being here?'

He hesitated a moment and a slight flush came on his face.

She observed both signs, slight as they

were, and sighed ; it was the first sigh she had ever breathed since her marriage.

‘Of course you are, of course you must be,’ she said quickly. ‘It has been selfish and blameable of me never to think of it before. It is paradise to me, but no doubt to you, used as you have been to the stir of the world, there must be some tedium, some dullness in this mountain isolation. I ought to have remembered that before.’

‘You need do nothing of the kind now,’ he said. ‘Who has been talking to you? Who has brought this little snake into our Eden?’

‘No one ; and it is not a snake at all, but a natural reflection. Hohenszalras and you are the world to me, but I cannot expect that Hohenszalras and I can be quite as much to yourself. It is always the difference between the woman and the man. You have great talents ; you are ambitious.’

‘Were I as ambitious as Alexander, surely I have gained wherewithal to be content!’

‘That is only compliment again, or if truth it is only a side of the truth. Nay, love, I do not think for a moment you are tired of me ; I am too self-satisfied for that ! But I think it is possible that this solitude may have grown, or may grow, wearisome to you ; that you desire,

perhaps without knowing it, to be more amidst the strife, the movement, and the pleasures of men. Aunt Otilie calls this "confinement to a fortress;" now that is a mere pleasantry, but if ever you should feel tempted to feel what she feels, have confidence enough in my good sense and in my affection to say so to me, and then——'

'And then? We will suppose I have this ingratitude and bad taste, what then?'

'Why then, my own wishes should not stand for one instant in the way of yours, or rather I would make yours mine. And do not use the word ingratitude, my dearest; there can be no question of that betwixt you and me.'

'Yes,' said Sabran, as he stooped towards her and touched her hair with his lips. 'When you gave me yourself you made me your debtor for all time; would have made me so had you been as poor as you are rich. When I speak of gratitude it is of *that* gift, I think, not of Hohenszalras.'

A warmth of pleasure flushed her cheek for a moment, and she smiled happily.

'You shall not beg the question so,' she said, with gentle insistence after a moment's pause. 'I have not forgotten your eloquence in the French Chamber. You are that rare

thing a born orator. You are not perhaps fitted to be a statesman, for I doubt if you would have the application or bear the tedium necessary, but you have every qualification for a diplomatist, a foreign minister.'

'I have not the first qualification, I have no country!'

She looked at him in surprise—he spoke with bitterness and self-contempt; but in a moment he had added quickly:—

'France is nothing to me now, and though I am Austrian by all ties and affections, I am not an Austrian before the law.'

'That is hardly true,' she answered, satisfied with the explanation. 'Since France is little to you you could be naturalised here whenever you chose, even if Idrac have not made you a Croat noble, as I believe the lawyers would say it had; and the Emperor, who knows and admires you, would, I think, at once give you gladly any mission you preferred; you would make so graceful, so perfect, so envied an ambassador! Diplomacy has indeed little force now, yet tact still tells wherever it be found, and it is as rare as blue roses in the unweeded garden of the world. I do not speak for myself, dear; that you know. Hohenzalras is my beloved home, and it was enough for me before I knew you, and nowhere else

could life ever seem to me so true, so high, so simple, and so near to God as here. But I do remember that men weary even of happiness when it is unwitnessed, and require the press and stir of emulation and excitement; and, if you feel that want, say so. Have confidence enough in me to believe that your welfare will be ever my highest law. Promise me this.'

He changed colour slightly at her generous and trustful words, but he answered without a moment's pause:

'Whenever I am so thankless to fate I will confess it. No; the world and I never valued one another much. I am far better here in the heart of your mountains. Here only have I known peace and rest.'

He spoke with a certain effort and emotion, and he stooped over his little son and raised him on her knees.

'These children shall grow up at Hohen-szalras,' he continued, 'and you shall teach them your love of the open air, the mountain solitudes, the simple people, the forest creatures, the influences and the ways of nature. You care for all those things, and they make up true wisdom, true contentment. As for myself, if you always love me I shall ask no more of fate.'

'If! Can you be afraid?'

‘Sometimes. One always fears to lose what one has never merited.’

‘Ah, my love, do not be so humble! If you saw yourself as I see you, you would be very proud.’

She smiled as she spoke, and stretched her hand out to him over the golden head of her child.

He took it and held it against his heart, clasped in both his own. Bela, impatient, slipped off his mother’s lap to pursue his capture of the daisies; the butterflies were forbidden joys, and he was obedient, though in his own little way he was proud and imperious. But there was a blue butterfly just in front of him, a *Lyccœna Adonis*, like a little bit of the sky come down and dancing about; he could not resist, he darted at it. As he was about to seize it she caught his fingers.

‘I have told you, Bela, you are never to touch anything that flies or moves. You are cruel.’

He tried to get away, and his face grew very warm and passionate.

‘Bela will be cruel, if he like,’ he said, knitting his pretty brows.

Though he was not more than four years old he knew very well that he was the Count Bela, to whom all the people gave homage, crowding

to kiss his tiny hand after Mass on holy-days. He was a very beautiful child, and all the prettier for his air of pride and resolution ; he had been early put on a little mountain pony, and could ride fearlessly down the forest glades with Otto. All the imperiousness of the great race which had dealt out life and death so many centuries at their caprice through the Hohe Tauern seemed to have been inherited by him, coupled with a waywardness and a vanity that were not traits of the house of Szalras. It was impossible, even though those immediately about him were wise and prudent, to wholly prevent the effects of the adulation with which the whole household was eager to wait on every whim of the little heir.

‘Bela wishes it!’ he would say, with an impatient frown, whenever his desire was combated or crossed: he had already the full conviction that to be Bela was to have full right to rule the world, including in it his brother Gela, who was of a serious, mild, and yielding disposition, and gave up to him in all things. As compensating qualities he was very affectionate and sensitive, and easily moved to self-reproach.

With a step Sabran reached him.

‘You dare to disobey your mother?’ he said, sternly. ‘Ask her forgiveness at once. Do you hear?’

Bela, who had never heard his father speak in such a tone, was very frightened, and lost all his colour ; but he was resolute, and had been four years old on Ascension Day. He remained silent and obstinate.

Sabran put his hand heavily on the child's shoulder.

‘Do you hear me, sir? Ask her pardon this moment.’

Bela was now fairly stunned into obedience.

‘Bela is sorry,’ he murmured. ‘Bela begs pardon.’

Then he burst into tears.

‘You alarmed him rather too much. He is so very young,’ she said to his father, when the child, forgiven and consoled, had trotted off to his nurse, who came for him.

‘He shall obey you, and find his law in your voice, or I will alarm him more,’ he said, with some harshness. ‘If I thought he would ever give you a moment's sorrow I should hate him!’

It was not the first time that Sabran had seen his own more evil qualities look at him from the beautiful little face of his elder son, and at each of those times a sort of remorse came upon him. ‘I was unworthy to beget *her* children,’ he thought, with the self-reproach that seldom left him, even amidst the deep tran-

quillity of his satisfied passions, and his perfect peace of life. Who could tell what trials, what pains, what shame even, might not fall on her in the years to come, with the errors that her offspring would have in them from his blood?

‘It is foolish,’ she murmured, ‘he is but a baby; yet it hurts one to see the human sin, the human wrath, look out from the infant eyes. It hurts one to remember, to realise, that one’s own angel, one’s own little flower, has the human curse born with it. I express myself ill; do you know what I mean? No, you do not, dear; you are a man. He is your son, and because he will be handsome and brave you will be proud of him; but he is not a young angel, not a blossom from Eden to you.’

‘You are my religion,’ he answered, ‘you shall be his. When he grows older he shall learn that to be born of such a mother as you is to enter the kingdom of heaven by inheritance. Shall he be unworthy that inheritance because he bears in him also the taint of my sorry passions, of my degraded humanity?’

‘Dear! I too am only an erring creature. I am not perfect as you think me.’

‘As I know you and as my children shall know you to be.’

‘You love me too well,’ she said again;

‘but it is a *beau défaut*, and I would not have you lose it.’

‘I shall never lose it whilst I have life,’ he said, with truth and passion. ‘I prize it more because most unworthy it.’

She looked at him surprised, and vaguely troubled at the self-reproach and the self-scorn of his passionate utterance. Seeing that surprise and trouble in her glance, he controlled the emotion that for the moment mastered him.

‘Ah, love!’ he said quickly and truly, ‘if you could but guess how gross and base a man’s life seems to him contrasted with the life of a pure and noble woman! Being born of you, those children, I think, should be as faultless and as soiless as those pearls that lie on your breast. But then they are mine also; so already on that boy’s face one sees the sins of revolt, of self-will, of cruelty—being mine also, your living pearls are dulled and stained!’

A greater remorse than she dreamed of made his heart ache as he said these words; but she heard in them only the utterance of that extreme and unwavering devotion to her which he had shown in all his acts and thoughts from the first hours of their union.



CHAPTER XVII.

THE Princess Otilie was scarcely less happy than they in the realisation of her dreams and prophecies. Those who had been most bitterly opposed to her alliance with him could find no fault in his actions and his affections.

‘I always said that Wanda ought to marry, since she had plainly no vocation for the cloister,’ she said a hundred times a year. ‘And I was certain that M. de Sabran was the person above all others to attract and to content her. She has much more imagination than she would be willing to allow, and he is capable at once of fascinating her fancy and of satisfying her intellect. No one can be dull where he is; he is one of those who make *la pluie et le beau temps* by his absence or presence; and,

besides that, no commonplace affection would have ever been enough for her. And he loves her like a poet, which he is at once whenever he leaves the world for Beethoven and Bach. I cannot imagine why you should have opposed the marriage, merely because he had not two millions in the Bank of France.'

'Not for that,' answered the Grand Duke ; 'rather because he broke the bank of Monte Carlo, and other similar reasons. A great player of baccara is scarcely the person to endow with the wealth of the Szalras.'

'The wealth is tied up tightly enough at the least, and you will admit that he was yet more eager than you that it should be so.'

'Oh, yes! he behaved very well. I never denied it. But she has placed it in his power to make away with the whole of Idrac, if he should ever choose. That was very unwise, but we had no power to oppose.'

'You may be quite sure that Idrac will go intact to the second son, as it has always done ; and I believe but for his own exertions Idrac would now be beneath the Danube waters. Perhaps you never heard all that story of the flood?'

'I only hope that if I have detractors you will defend me from them,' said Prince Lilienhöhe, giving up argument.

Fair weather is always especially fair in the eyes of those who have foretold at sunset that the morrow would be fine; and so the married life of Wanda von Szalras was especially delightful as an object of contemplation, as a theme of exultation, to the Princess, who alone had been clear-sighted enough to foresee the future. She really also loved Sabran like a son, and took pride and pleasure in the filial tenderness he showed her, and in his children, with the beautiful blue eyes that had gleams of light in them like sapphires. The children themselves adored her; and even the bold and wilful Bela was as quiet as a startled fawn beside this lovely little lady, with her snow-white hair and her delicate smile, whose cascades of lace always concealed such wonderful bon-bon boxes, and gilded cosaques, and illuminated stories of the saints.

Almost all their time was spent at Hohen-szalras. A few winter months in Vienna was all they had ever passed away from it, except one visit to Idrac and the Hungarian estates. The children never left it for a day. He shared her affection for the place, and for the hardy and frank mountain people around them. He seemed to her to entirely forget Romaris, and beyond the transmission of moneys to its priest, he took no heed of it. She hesitated to recall

it to him, since to do so might have seemed to remind him that it was she, not he, who was suzerain in the Hohe Tauern. Romaris was but a bleak rock, a strip of sea-swept sand; it was natural that it should have no great hold on his affections, only recalling as it did all that its lords had lost.

‘I hate its name,’ he said impetuously once; and seeing the surprise upon her face, he added: ‘I was very lonely and wretched there; I tried to take interest in it because you bade me, but I failed; all I saw, all I thought of, was yourself, and I believed you as far and for ever removed from me as though you had dwelt in some other planet. No! perhaps I am superstitious: I do not wish you to go to Romaris. I believe it would bring us misfortune. ‘The sea is full of treachery, the sands are full of graves.’

She smiled.

‘Superstition is a sort of parody of faith; I am sure you are not superstitious. I do not care to go to Romaris; I like to cheat myself into the belief that you were born and bred in the Iselthal. Otto said to me the other day, “My lord must be a son of the soil, or how could he know our mountains so well as he does, and how could he anywhere have learned to shoot like that?”’

... ‘I am very glad that Otto does me so much

honour. When he first met me, he would have shot me like a fox, if you had given the word. Ah, my love! how often I think of you that day, in your white serge, with your girdle of gold, and your long gold-headed staff, and your little ivory horn. You were truly a *châtelaine* of the old mystical German days. You had some *Schlüsselblumen* in your hand. They were indeed the key flower to my soul, though, alas! treasures, I fear, you found none on your entrance there.'

'I shall not answer you, since to answer would be to flatter you, and Aunt Ottilie already does that more than is good for you,' she said smiling, as she passed her fingers over the waves of his hair. 'By the way, whom shall we invite to meet the Lilienhöhe? Will you make out a list?'

'The Grand Duke does not share Frau Ottilie's goodness for me.'

'What would you? He has been made of buckram and parchment; besides which, nothing that is not German has, to his mind, any right to exist. By the way, Egon wrote to me this morning; he will be here at last.'

He looked up quickly in unspoken alarm: 'Your cousin Egon? Here?'

'Why are you so surprised? I was sure that sooner or later he would conquer that

feeling of being unable to meet you. I begged him to come now ; it is eight whole years since I have seen him. When once you have met you will be friends—for my sake.'

He was silent ; a look of trouble and alarm was still upon his face.

'Why should you suppose it any easier to him now than then?' he said at length. 'Men who love *you* do not change. There are women who compel constancy, *sans le vouloir*. The meeting can but be painful to Prince Vàsàrhely.'

'Dear René,' she answered in some surprise, 'my nearest male relative and I cannot go on for ever without seeing each other. Even these years have done Egon a great deal of harm. He has been absent from the Court for fear of meeting us. He has lived with his hussars, or voluntarily confined to his estates, until he grows morose and solitary. I am deeply attached to him. I do not wish to have the remorse upon me of having caused the ruin of his gallant and brilliant life. When he has been once here he will like you : men who are brave have always a certain sympathy. When he has seen you here he will realise that destiny is unchangeable, and grow reconciled to the knowledge that I am your wife.'

Sabran gave an impatient gesture of denial, and began to write the list of invitations for the

autumn circle of guests who were to meet the Prince and Princess of Lilienhöhe.

Once every summer and every autumn Hohenzalras was filled with a brilliant house-party, for she sacrificed her own personal preferences to what she believed to be for the good of her husband. She knew that men cannot always live alone; that contact with the world is needful to their minds and bracing for it. She had a great dread lest the ghost *ennui* should show his pale face over her husband's shoulder, for she realised that from the life of the asphalté of the Champs-Élysées to the life amidst the pine forests of the Iselthal was an abrupt transition that might easily bring tedium in its train. And tedium is the most terrible and the most powerful foe love ever encounters.

Sabran completed the list, and when he had corrected it into due accordance with all Lilienhöhe's personal and political sympathies and antipathies, despatched the invitations, 'for eight days,' written on cards that bore the joint arms of the Counts of Idrac and the Counts of Szalras. He had adopted the armorial bearings of the countship of Idrac as his own, and seemed disposed to abandon altogether those of the Sabrans of Romaris.

When they were written he went out by himself and rode long and fast through the

mists of a chilly afternoon, through dripping forest ways and over roads where little water-courses spread in shining shallows. The coming of Egon Väsàrhely troubled him and alarmed him. He had always dreaded his first meeting with the Magyar noble ; and as the years had dropped by one after another, and her cousin had failed to find courage to see her again, he had begun to believe that they and Väsàrhely would remain always strangers. His wish had begotten his thought. He knew that she wrote at intervals to her cousin, and he to her ; he knew that at the birth of each of their children some magnificent gift, with a formal letter of felicitation, had come from the Colonel of the White Hussars ; but as time had gone on and Prince Egon had avoided all possibility of meeting them, he had grown to suppose that the wound given her rejected lover was too profound ever to close ; nor did he wonder that it was so : it seemed to him that any man who loved her must do so for all eternity, if eternity there should be. To learn suddenly that within another month Väsàrhely would be his guest, distressed and alarmed him in a manner she never dreamed. They had been so happy. On their cloudless heaven there seemed to him to rise a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, but bearing with it disaster and a moonless night.

‘Perhaps he will have forgotten,’ he thought, as he strove to shake off his forebodings. ‘We were so young then. He was not even as old as I!’

And he rode fast and furiously home-wards as the day drew in, and the lighted windows of the great castle seemed to smile at him as he saw it high up above the darkness of the woods and of the evening mists, his home, beloved, sacred, infinitely dear to him; dear as the soil of the mother country which the wrecked mariner reaches after facing death on the deep sea.

‘God save her from suffering by me!’ he said, in an unconscious prayer, as he drew rein before the terrace of Hohenszalras. Almost he believed in God through her.

When, after dressing, he went into the Saxe room, the peace and beauty of the scene had never struck him so strongly as it did now, coming out of the shadows of the wet woods and the gloom of his own anxieties; anxieties the heavier and the more wearing because they could be shared by no one. The soft, full light of the wax candles fell on the Louis Seize embroideries and the white woodwork of the panelling and the china borders of the mirrors. The Princess Otilie sat making silk-netting for the children’s balls; his wife was reading, and

Bela and Gela, who were there for their privileged half-hour before dinner, were sitting together on a white bearskin, playing with the coloured balls of the game of solitaire. The soft light from the chandeliers and sconces of the Saxe Royale china fell on the golden heads and the velvet frocks of the children, on the old laces and the tawny-coloured plush of their mother's skirts, on the great masses of flowers in the Saxe bowls, and on the sleeping forms of the big dogs Donau and Neva. It was an interior that would have charmed Chardin, that would have been worthy of Vandyck.

As he looked at it he thought with a sort of ecstasy, 'All that is mine;' and then his heart-strings tightened as he thought again, 'If she knew——?'

She looked up at his entrance with a welcome on her face that needed no words.

'Where have you been in the rain all this long afternoon? You see we have a fire, even though it is midsummer. Bela, rise, and make your obeisance, and push that chair nearer the hearth.'

The two little boys stood up and kissed his hand, one after another, with the pretty formality of greeting on which she always insisted; then they went back to their coloured glass balls, and he sank into a low chair beside

his wife with a sigh half of fatigue, half of content.

‘Yes, I have been riding all the time,’ he said to her. ‘I am not sure that Siegfried approved it. But it does one good sometimes, and after the blackness and the wetness of that forest how charming it is to come home!’

She looked at him with wistfulness.

‘I wish you were not vexed that Egon is coming! I am sure you have been thinking of it as you rode.’

‘Yes, I have; but I am ashamed of doing so. He is your cousin, that shall be enough for me. I will do my best to make him welcome. Only there is this difficulty; a welcome from me to him will seem in itself an insult.’

‘An insult! when you are my husband? One would think you were my *jägermeister*. Dear mother mine, help me to scold him.’

‘I am a stranger,’ he said, under his breath.

She smiled a little, but she said with a certain hauteur:

‘You are master of Hohenszalras, as your son will be when our places shall know us no more. Do not let the phantom of Egon come between us, I beseech you. His real presence never will do so, that is certain.’

‘Nothing shall come between us,’ said Sabran, as his hand took and closed upon hers,

‘Forgive me if I have brought some gloomy *nix* out of the dark woods with me; he will flee away in the light of this beloved white-room. No evil spirits could dare stay by your hearth.’

‘There are *nixes* in the forests,’ said Bela in a whisper to his brother.

‘Ja!’ said Gela, not comprehending.

‘We will kill them all when we are big,’ said Bela.

‘Ja! ja!’ said Gela.

Bela knew very well what a *nix* was. Otto had told him all about kobolds and sprites, as his pony trotted down the drives.

‘Or we will take them prisoners,’ he added, remembering that his mother never allowed anything to be killed, not even butterflies.

‘Ja!’ said Gela again, rolling the pretty blue and pink and amber balls about in the white fur of the bearskin.

Gela’s views of life were simplified by the disciple’s law of imitation; they were restricted to doing whatever Bela did, when that was possible, when it was not possible he remained still adoring Bela, with his little serious face as calm as a god’s.

She used to think that when they should grow up Bela would be a great soldier like Wallenstein or Condé, and Gela would stay at

home and take care of his people here in the green, lone, happy Iselthal.

Time ran on and the later summer made the blooming hay grow brown on all the alpine meadows, and made the garden of Hohenszalras blossom with a million autumnal glories; it brought also the season of the first house-party. Egon Väsàrhely was to arrive one day before the Lilienhöhe and the other guests.

‘I want Egon so much to see Bela!’ she said, with the thoughtless cruelty of a happy mother forgetful of the pain of a rejected lover.

‘I fear Bela will find little favour in your cousin’s eyes, since he is mine too,’ said Sabran.

‘Oh, Egon is content to be only our cousin by this ——’

‘You think so? You do not know yourself if you imagine that.’

‘Egon is very loyal. He would not come here if he could not greet you honestly.’

Sabran’s face flushed a little, and he turned away. He vaguely dreaded the advent of Egon Väsàrhely, and there were so many innocent words uttered in the carelessness of intimate intercourse which stabbed him to the quick; she had so wounded him all unconscious of her act.

‘Shall we have a game of billiards?’ he

asked her as they stood in the Rittersaal, whilst the rain fell fast without. She played billiards well, and could hold her own against him, though his game was one that had often been watched by a crowded *galerie* in Paris with eager speculation and heavy wager. An hour afterwards they were still playing when the clang of a great bell announced the approach of the carriage which had been sent to Windisch-Matrey.

‘Come!’ she said joyously, as she put back her cue in its rest; but Sabran drew back.

‘Receive your cousin first alone,’ he said. ‘He must resent my presence here. I will not force it on him on the threshold of your house.’

‘Of our house! Why will you use wrong pronouns? Believe me, dear, Egon is too generous to bear you the animosity you think.’

‘Then he never loved you,’ said Sabran, somewhat impatiently, as he sent one ball against another with a sharp collision. ‘I will come if you wish it,’ he added; ‘but I think it is not in the best taste to so assert myself.’

‘Egon is only my cousin and your guest. You are the master of Hohenszalras. Come! you were not so difficult when you received the Emperor.’

‘I had done the Emperor no wrong,’ said

Sabran, controlling the impatience and the reluctance he still felt.

‘You have done Egon none. I should not have been his wife had I never been yours.’

‘Who knows?’ murmured Sabran, as he followed her into the entrance hall. The stately figure of Egon Vàsàrhely enveloped in furs was just passing through the arched doorway.

She went towards him with a glad welcome and both hands outstretched.

Prince Egon bowed to the ground: then took both her hands in his and kissed her on the cheek.

Sabran, who grew very pale, advanced and greeted him with ceremonious grace.

‘My wife has bade me welcome you, Prince, but it would be presumptuous in me, a stranger, to do that. All her kindred must be dear and sacred here.’

Egon Vàsàrhely, with an effort to which he had for years been vainly schooling himself, stretched out his hand to take her husband’s; but as he did so, and his glance for the first time dwelt on Sabran, a look surprised and indefinitely perplexed came on his own features. Unconsciously he hesitated a moment; then, controlling himself, he replied with a few fitting words of courtesy and friendship. That there

should be some embarrassment, some constraint, was almost inevitable, and did not surprise her: she saw both, but she also saw that both were hidden under the serenity of high breeding and worldly habit. The most difficult moment had passed: they went together into the Rittersaal, talked together a little on a few indifferent topics, and in a little space Prince Egon withdrew to his own apartments to change his travelling clothes. Sabran left him on the threshold of his chamber.

Vasàrhely locked the doors, locking out even his servant, threw off his furs and sat down, leaning his head on his hands. The meeting had cost him even more than he had feared that it would do. For five years he had dreaded this moment, and its pain was as sharp and as fresh to him as though it had been unforeseen. To sleep under the same roof with the husband of Wanda von Szalras! He had overrated his power of self-control, underrated his power of suffering, when to please her he had consented after five years to visit Hohenszalras. What were five years?—half a century would not have changed him.

Under the plea of fatigue, he, who had sat in his saddle eighteen hours at a stretch, and was braced to every form of endurance in the forest chase and in the tented field, sent excuses to his

host for remaining in his own rooms until the Ave Maria rung. When he at length went down to the blue-room where she was, he had recovered, outwardly at least, his tranquillity and his self-possession, though here, in this familiar, once beloved chamber, where every object had been dear to him from his boyhood, a keener trial than any he had passed through awaited him, as she led forward to meet him a little boy clad in white velvet, with a cloud of light golden hair above deep blue luminous eyes, and said to him :

‘Egon, this is my Bela. You will love him a little, for my sake?’

Vàsàrhely felt a chill run through him like the cold of death as he stooped towards the child ; but he smiled and touched the boy’s forehead with his lips.

‘May the spirit of our lost Bela be with him and dwell in his heart,’ he murmured ; ‘better I cannot wish him.’

With an effort he turned to Sabran.

‘Your little son is a noble child ; you may with reason be proud of him. He is very like you in feature. I see no trace of the Szalras.’

‘The other boy is more like Wanda,’ replied Sabran, sensible of a certain tenacity of observation with which Vàsàrhely was gazing at him. ‘As for my daughter, she is too young

for anyone to say whom she will resemble. All I desire is that she should be like her mother, physically and spiritually.'

'Of course,' said the Prince, absently, still looking from Sabran to the child, as if in the endeavour to follow some remembrance that eluded him. The little face of Béla was a miniature of his father's, they were as alike as it is possible for a child and a man to be so, and Egon Vársrhely perplexedly mused and wondered at vague memories which rose up to him as he gazed on each.

'And what do you like best to do, my little one?' he asked of Béla, who was regarding him with curious and hostile eyes.

'To ride,' answered Béla at once, in his pretty uncertain German.

'There you are a true Szalras at least. And your brother Gela, can he ride yet? Where is Gela, by the way?'

'He is asleep,' said Béla, with some contempt. 'He is a little thing. Yes; he rides, but it is in a chair-saddle. It is not real riding.'

'I see. Well, when you come and see me you shall have some real riding, on wild horses if you like;' and he told the child stories of the great Magyar steppes, and the herds of young horses, and the infinite delight of the unending gallop over the wide hushed plain; and all the

while his heart ached bitterly, and the sight of the child—who was her child, yet had that stranger's face—was to him like a jagged steel being turned and twisted inside a bleeding wound. Bela, however, was captivated by the new visions that rose before him.

‘Bela will come to Hungary,’ he said with condescension, and then with an added thought, continued: ‘I think Bela has great lands there. Otto said so.’

‘Bela has nothing at all,’ said Sabran, sternly. ‘Bela talks great nonsense sometimes, and it would be better he should go to sleep with his brother.’

Bela looked up shyly under his golden cloud of hair. ‘Folko is Bela’s,’ he said under his breath. Folko was his pony.

‘No,’ said Sabran; ‘Folko belongs to your mother. She only allows you to have him so long as you are good to him.’

‘Bela is always good to him,’ he said decidedly.

‘Bela is faultless in his own estimation,’ said his mother, with a smile. ‘He is too little to be wise enough to see himself as he is.’

This view made Bela’s blue eyes open very wide and fill very sorrowfully. It was humiliating. He longed to get back to Gela, who always listened to him dutifully, and never said

anything in answer except an entirely acquiescent 'Ja! ja!' which was indeed about the limitation of Gela's lingual powers. In a few moments, indeed, his governess came for him and took him away, a little dainty figure in his ivory velvet and his blue silk stockings, with his long golden curls hanging to his waist.

'It is so difficult to keep him from being spoilt,' she said, as the door closed on him. 'The people make a little prince, a little god, of him. He believes himself to be something wonderful. Gela, who is so gentle and quiet, is left quite in the shade.'

'I suppose Gela takes your title?' said Väsàrhely to his host. 'It is usual with the Austrian families for the second son to have some distant appellation?'

'They are babies,' said Sabran, impatiently. 'It will be time enough to settle those matters when they are old enough to be court-pages or cadets. They are Bela and Gela at present. The only real republic is childhood.'

'I am afraid Bela is the *tyrannus* to which all republics succumb,' said Wanda, with a smile. 'He is extremely autocratic in his notions, and in his family. In all his "make believe" games he is crowned.'

'He is a beautiful child,' said her cousin, and she answered, still smiling :

‘Oh, yes: he is so like René!’

Egon Vàsàrhely turned his face from her. The dinner was somewhat dull, and the evening seemed tedious, despite the efforts of Sabran to promote conversation, and the *écarté* which he and his guest played together. They were all sensible that some chord was out of tune, and glad that on the morrow a large house-party would be there to spare them a continuation of this difficult intercourse.

‘Your cousin will never forgive me,’ said Sabran to her when they were alone. ‘I think, beside his feeling that I stand for ever between you and him, there is an impatience of me as a stranger and one unworthy you.’

‘You do yourself and him injustice,’ she answered. ‘I shall be unhappy if you and he be not friends.’

‘Then unhappy you will be, my beloved. We both adore you.’

‘Do not say that. He would not be here if it were so.’

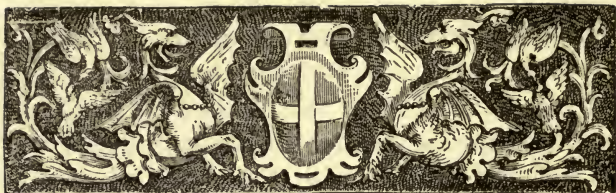
‘Ah! look at him when he looks at Bela!’

She sighed; she had felt a strong emotion on the sight of her cousin, for Egon Vàsàrhely was much changed by these years of pain. His grand carriage and his martial beauty were unaltered, but all the fire and the light of

earlier years were gone out of his face, and a certain gloom and austerity had come there. To all other women he would have been the more attractive for the melancholy which was in such apt contrast with the heroic adventures of his life, but to her the change in him was a mute reproach which filled her with remorse though she had done no wrong.

Meantime Prince Egon, throwing open his window, leaned out into the cold rainy night, as though a hand were at his throat and suffocating him. And amidst all the tumult of his pain and revolt, one dim thought was incessantly intruding itself; he was always thinking, as he recalled the face of Sabran and of Sabran's little son, 'Where have I seen those blue eyes, those level brows, those delicate curved lips?'

They were so familiar, yet so strange to him. When he would have given a name to them they receded into the shadows of some far away past of his own, so far away he could not follow them. He sat up half the night letting the wind beat and the rain fall on him. He could not sleep.



CHAPTER XVIII.

QN the morrow thirty or forty people arrived, amongst them Baron Kaulnitz *en congé* from his embassy.

‘What think you of Sabran?’ he asked of Egon Vàsàrhely, who answered:

‘He is a perfect gentleman. He is a charming companion. He plays admirably at *écarté*.

‘*Ecarté*! I spoke of his moral worth: what is your impression of that?’

‘If he had not satisfied her as to that, Wanda would not be his wife,’ answered the Prince gravely. ‘He has given her beautiful children, and it seems to me that he renders her perfectly happy. We should all be grateful to him.’

‘The children are certainly very beautiful,’ said Baron Kaulnitz, and said no more.

‘The people all around are unfeignedly attached to him,’ Vàsàrhely continued with generous effort. ‘I hear nothing but his praise. Nor do I think it the conventional compliment which loyalty leads them to pay the husband of their Countess; it is very genuine attachment. The men of the old Archduchy are not easily won; it is only qualities of daring and manliness which appeal to their sympathies. That he has gained their affections is as great testimony to his character in one way as that he has gained Wanda’s is in another. At Idrac also the people adore him, and Croats are usually slow to see merit in strangers.’

‘In short, he is a paragon,’ said the ambassador, with a little dubious smile. ‘So much the better, since he is irrevocably connected with us.’

Sabran was at no time seen to greater advantage than when he was required to receive and entertain a large house-party. Always graceful, easily witty, endowed with that winning tact which is to society as cream is to the palate, the charm he possessed for women and the ascendancy he could, at times, exercise over men—even men who were opposed to him—were never more admirably displayed than when he was the master of Hohenszalras, with crowned heads, and princes, and diplomatists,

and beauties gathered beneath his roof. His mastery, moreover, of all field sports, and his skill at all games that demanded either intelligence or audacity, made him popular with a hardy and brilliant nobility; his daring in a boar hunt at noon was equalled by his science at whist in the evening. Strongly prejudiced against him at the onset, the great nobles who were his guests had long ceased to feel anything for him except respect and regard; whilst the women admired him none the less for that unwavering devotion to his wife which made even the conventionalities of ordinary flirtation wholly impossible to him. With all his easy gallantry and his elegant homage to them, they all knew that, at heart, he was as cold as the rocks to all women save one.

‘It is really the knight’s love for his lady,’ said the Countess Brancka once; and Sabran, overhearing, said: ‘Yes, and I think that if there were more like my lady on earth, knighthood might revive on other scenes than Wagner’s.’

Between him and the Countess Brancka there was a vague intangible enmity, veiled under the perfection of courtesy. They could ill have told why they disliked each other; but they did so. Beneath their polite or trivial or careless speech they often aimed at each other’s feelings or foibles with accuracy

and malice. She had stayed at Hohenzalras more or less time each year in the course of her flight between France and Vienna, and was there now. He admired his wife's equanimity and patience under the trial of Mdme. Olga's frivolities, but he did not himself forbear from as much sarcasm as was possible in a man of the world to one who was his guest, and by marriage his relative, and he was sensible of her enmity to himself, though she paid him many compliments, and sometimes too assiduously sought his companionship. '*Elle fait le ronron, mais gare à ses pattes!*' he said once to his wife concerning her.

Sabran appraised her indeed with unflattering accuracy. He knew by heart all the wiles and wisdom of such a woman as she was. Her affectations did not blind him to her real danger, and her exterior frivolity did not conceal from him the keen and subtle self-interest and the strong passions which laboured beneath it.

She felt that she had an enemy in him, and partly in self-protection, partly in malice, she set herself to convert a foe into a friend, perhaps, without altogether confessing it to herself, into a lover as well.

The happiness that prevailed at Hohenzalrasburg annoyed her for no other reason than that it wearied her to witness it. She did not

envy it, because she did not want happiness at all ; she wanted perpetual change, distraction, temptation, passion, triumph—in a word, excitement, which becomes the drug most unobtainable to those who have early exhausted all the experiences and varieties of pleasure.

Mdme. Brancka had always an unacknowledged resentment against her sister-in-law, for being the owner of all the vast possessions of the Szalras. ‘If Gela had lived!’ she thought constantly. ‘If I had only had a son by him before he died, this woman would have had her dower and nothing more.’ That his sister should possess all, whilst she had by her later marriage lost her right even to a share in that vast wealth, was a perpetual bitterness to her.

Stefan Brancka was indeed rich, but he was an insensate gambler. She was extravagant to the last degree, with all the costly caprices of a *cocodette* who reigned in the two most brilliant capitals of the world. They were often troubled by their own folly, and again and again the generosity of his elder brother had rescued them from humiliating embarrassments. At such moments she had almost hated Wanda von Szalras for these large possessions, of which, according to her own views, her sister-in-law made no use whatever. Meantime, she wished Egon Väsàrhely to die childless, and to that

end had not been unwilling for the woman he loved to marry anyone else. She had reasoned that the Szalras estates would go to the Crown or the Church if Wanda did not marry ; whilst all the power and possessions of Egon Vàsàrhely must, if he had no sons, pass in due course to his brother. She had the subtle acuteness of her race, and she had the double power of being able at once to wait very patiently and to spring with swift rage on what she needed. To her sister-in-law she always appeared a mere flutterer on the breath of fashion. The grave and candid nature of the one could not follow or perceive the intricacies of the other.

‘She is a cruel woman and a perilous one,’ Sabran said one day to his wife’s surprise.

She answered him that Olga Brancka had always seemed to her a mere frivolous *mondaine*, like so many others of their world.

‘No,’ he persisted. ‘You are wrong ; she is not a butterfly. She has too much energy. She is a profoundly immoral woman also. Look at her eyes.’

‘That is Stefan’s affair,’ she answered, ‘not ours. He is indifferent.’

‘Or unsuspecting ? Did your brother care for her ?’

‘He was madly in love with her. She was only sixteen when he married her. He fell at

Solferino half a year later. When she married my cousin it shocked and disgusted me. Perhaps I was foolish to take it thus, but it seemed such a sin against Gela. To die *so*, and not to be even remembered !’

‘Did your cousin Egon approve this second marriage?’

‘No, he opposed it; he had our feeling about it. But Stefan, though very young, was beyond any control. He had the fortune as he had the title of his mother, the Countess Brancka, and Olga bewitched him as she had done my brother.’

‘She *is* a witch, a wicked witch,’ said Sabran.

The great autumn party was brilliant and agreeable. All things went well, and the days were never monotonous. The people were well assorted, and the social talent of their host made their outdoor sports and their indoor pastimes constantly varied, whilst Hungarian musicians and Viennese comedians played waltzes that would have made a statue dance, and represented the little comedies for which he himself had been famous at the Mirlitons.

He was not conscious of it, but he was passionately eager for Egon Vàsàrhely to be witness, not only of his entire happiness, but of his social powers. To Vàsàrhely he seemed to

put forward the perfection of his life with almost insolence; with almost exaggeration to exhibit the joys and the gifts with which nature and chance had so liberally dowered him. The stately Magyar soldier, sitting silent and melancholy apart, watched him with a curious pang, that in a lesser nature would have been a consuming envy. Now and then, though Sabran and his wife spoke rarely to each other in the presence of others, a glance, a smile, a word passed between them that told of absolute unuttered tenderness, profound and inexhaustible as the deep seas; in the very sound of their laughter, in the mere accent of their voices, in a careless caress to one of their children, in a light touch of the hand to one another as they rode, or as they met in a room, there was the expression of a perfect joy, of a perfect faith between them, which pierced the heart of the watcher of it. Yet would he not have had it otherwise at her cost.

‘Since she has chosen him as the companion of her life, it is well that he should be what she can take pride in, and what all men can praise,’ he thought, and yet the happiness of this man seemed to him an audacity, an insolence. What human lover could merit her?

Between himself and Sabran there was the most perfect courtesy, but no intimacy. They

both knew that if for fifty years they met continually they would never be friends. All her endeavours to produce sympathy between them failed. Sabran was conscious of a constant observation of him by her cousin, which seemed to him to have a hostile motive, and which irritated him extremely, though he did not allow his irritation any visible vent. Olga Brancka perceived, and with the objectless malice of women of her temperament, amused herself with fanning, the slumbering enmity, as children play at fire.

‘You cannot expect Egon to love you,’ she said once to her host. ‘You know he was the betrothed of Wanda from her childhood—at least in his own hopes, and in the future sketched for them by their families.’

‘I was quite aware of that before I married,’ he answered her indifferently. ‘But those family arrangements are tranquil disposals of destiny which, if they be disturbed, leave no great trace of trouble. The Prince is young still, and a famous soldier as well as a great noble. He has no lack of consolation if he need it, and I cannot believe that he does.’

Mdme. Olga laughed.

‘You know as well as I do that Egon adores the very stirrup your wife’s foot touches!’

‘I know he is her much beloved cousin,’

said Sabran, in a tone which admitted of no reply.

To Vàsàrhely his sister-in-law said confidentially :

‘ Dear Egon, why did you not stay on the *pusztas* or remain with your hussars ? You make *le beau* Sabran jealous.’

‘ Jealous !’ asked Vàsàrhely, with a bitter smile. ‘ He has much cause, when she has neither eye nor ear, neither memory nor thought of any kind for any living thing except himself and those children who are all his very portraits ! Why do you say these follies, Olga ? You know that my cousin Wanda chose her lord out of all the world, and loves him as no one would have supposed she had it in her to love any mortal creature.’

He spoke imperiously, harshly, and she was silenced.

‘ What do you think of him ?’ she said with hesitation.

‘ Everyone asks me that question. I am not his keeper !’

‘ But you must form some opinion. He is virtual lord of Hohenszalras, and I believe she has made over to him all the appanages of Idrac, and his children will have everything.’

‘ Are they not her natural heirs ? Who should inherit from her if not her sons ?’

‘Of course, of course they will inherit, only they inherit nothing from him. It was certainly a great stroke of fortune for a landless gentleman to make. Why does the *gentil-homme pauvre* always so captivate women?’

‘What do you mean to insinuate, Olga?’ he asked her, with a stern glance of his great black eyes.’

‘Oh, nothing; only his history was peculiar. I remember his arrival in France, his first appearance in society; it is many years ago now. All the Faubourg received him, but some said at the time that it was too romantic to be true—those Mexican forests, that long exile of the Sabran, the sudden appearance of this beautiful young marquis; you will grant it was romantic. I suppose it was the romance that made even Wanda’s clear head turn a little. It is a *vin capiteux* for many women. And then such a life in Paris after it—duels, baccara, bonnes fortunes, clever comedies, a touch like Liszt’s, a sudden success in the Chamber—it was all so romantic; it was bound to bring him at last to his haven, the Prince Charmant of an enchanted castle! Only enchanted castles sometimes grow dull, and Princes Charmants are not always amusable by the same châtelaine!’

Egon Vàsàrhely, with his eyes sombre

under their long black lashes, listened to the easy bantering phrases with the vague suspicion of an honest and slow-witted man that a woman is trying to drop poison into his ear which she wishes to pass as *eau sucrée*. He did not altogether follow her insinuation, but he understood something of her drift. They were alone in a corner of the ball-room, whilst the cotillon was at its height, conducted by Sabran, who had been famous for its leadership in Paris and Vienna. He stooped his head and looked her full in her eyes.

‘Look here, Olga. I am not sure what you mean, but I believe you are tired of seeing my cousin’s happiness, merely because it is something with which you cannot interfere. For myself I would protect her happiness as I would her honour if I thought either endangered. Whether you or I like the Marquis de Sabran is wholly beyond the question. She loves him, and she has made him one of us. His honour is now ours. For myself I would defend him in his absence as though he were my own brother. Not for his sake at all—for hers. I do not express myself very well, but you know what I mean. Here is Max returning to claim you.’

Silenced and a little alarmed the Countess Brancka rose and went off to her place in the cotillon.

Vàsàrhely, sitting where she had left him, watched the mazes of the cotillon, the rhythm of the tzigane musicians coming to his ear freighted with a thousand familiar memories of the czardas danced madly in the long Hungarian nights. Time had been when the throb of the tzigane strings had stirred all his pulses like magic, but now all his bold bright life seemed numb and frozen in him.

His eyes rested on his cousin, where she stood conversing with a crown prince, who was her chief guest, and passed from her to follow the movements of Sabran, who with supreme ease and elegance was leading a new intricate measure down the ball-room.

She was happy, that he could not doubt. Every action, every word, every glance said so with a meaning not to be doubted. He thought she had never looked so handsome as she did to-night since that far away day in her childhood when he had seen her with the red and white roses in her lap and the crown upon her curls. She had the look of her childhood in her eyes, that serene and glad light which had been dimmed by her brothers' death, but now shone there again tranquil, radiant, and pure as sunlight is. She wore white velvet and white brocade; her breast was hidden in white roses; she wore her famous pearls and the

ribbons of the Starred Cross of Austria and of the Prussian Order of Merit; she held in her hand a large painted fan which had belonged to Maria Theresa. Every now and then, as she talked with her royal guest, her glance strayed down the room to where her husband was, and lingered there a moment with a little smile.

Vásàrhely watched her for awhile, then rose abruptly, and made his way out of the ball-room and the state apartments down the corridors of the old house he knew so well towards his own chamber. He thought he would write to her and leave upon the morrow. What need was there for him to stay on in this perpetual pain? He had done enough for the world, which had seen him under the roof of Hohenzalras.

As he took his way through the long passages, tapestry-hung or oak-panelled, which led across the great building to his own set of rooms in the clock tower, he passed an open door out of which a light was streaming. As he glanced within he saw it was the children's sleeping apartment, of which the door was open because the night was warm, unusually warm for the heart of the Gross Glöckner mountains. An impulse he could not have explained made him pause and enter. The three little white beds of carved Indian work, with curtains of lace, looked very snowy and

peaceful in the pale light from a hanging lamp. The children were all asleep; the one nearest the door was Bela.

Vàsàrhely stood and looked at him. His head was thrown back on his pillow and his arms were above his head. His golden hair, which was cut straight and low over his forehead, had been pushed back in his slumber; he looked more like his father than in his waking hours, for as he dreamed there was a look of coldness and of scorn upon his childish face, which made him so resemble Sabran that the man who looked on him drew his breath hard with pain.

The night-nurse rose from her seat, recognising Prince Egon, whom she had known from his childhood.

‘The little Count is so like the Marquis,’ she said, approaching; ‘so is Herr Gela. Ah, my Prince, you remember the noble gentlemen whose names they bear? God send they may be like them in their lives and not their deaths!’

‘An early death is good,’ said Vàsàrhely, as he stood beside the child’s bed. He thought how good it would have been if he had fallen at Sadowa or Königsgratz, or earlier by the side of Gela and Victor, charging with his White Hussars.

The old nurse rambled on, full of praise and

stories of the children's beauty, and strength, and activity, and intelligence. Vàsàrhely did not hear her ; he stood lost in thought looking down on the sleeping figure of Bela, who, as if conscious of strange eyes upon him, moved uneasily in his slumber, and ruffled his golden hair with his hands, and thrust off his coverings from his beautiful round white limbs.

‘Count Bela is not like our saint who died,’ said the old nurse. ‘He is always masterful, and loves his own way. My lady is strict with him, and wisely so, for he is a proud rebellious child. But he is very generous, and has noble ways. Count Gela is a little angel ; he will be like the Heilige Graf.’

Vàsàrhely did not hear anything she said. His gaze was bent on the sleeping child, studying the lines of the delicate brows, of the curving lips, of the long black lashes. It was so familiar, so familiar ! Suddenly as he gazed a light seemed to leap out of the darkness of long forgotten years, and the memory which had haunted him stood out clear before him.

‘He is like Vassia Kazán !’ he cried, half aloud. The face of the child had recalled what in the face of the man had for ever eluded his remembrance.

He thrust a gold coin in the nurse's hand, and hurried from the chamber. A sudden in-

conceivable, impossible suspicion had leaped up before him as he had gazed on the sleeping loveliness of Sabran's little son.

The old woman saw his sudden pallor, his uncertain gesture, and thought, 'Poor gallant gentleman! He wishes these pretty boys were his own. Well, it might have been better if he had been master here, though there is nothing to say against the one who is so. Still, a stranger is always a stranger, and foreign blood is bad.'

Then she drew the coverings over Bela's naked little limbs, and passed on to make sure that the little Otilie, who had been born when the primroses were first out in the Iselthal woods, was sleeping soundly, and wanted nothing.

Vàsàrhely made his way to his own chamber, and there sat down heavily, mechanically, like a man waking out from a bad dream.

His memory went back to twenty years before, when he, a little lad, had accompanied his father on a summer visit to the house of a Russian, Prince Paul Zabaroff. It was a house, gay, magnificent, full of idle men and women of facile charm; it was not a house for youth; but both the Prince Vàsàrhely and the Prince Zabaroff were men of easy morals—*viveurs*,

gamesters, and philosophers, who at fifteen years old themselves had been lovers and men of the world. At that house had been present a youth, some years older than he was, who was known as Vassia Kazán : a youth whose beauty and wit made him the delight of the women there, and whose skill at games and daring in sports won him the admiration of the men. It was understood without even being said openly that Vassia Kazán was a natural son of the Prince Zabarroff. The little Hungarian prince, child as he was, had wit enough and enough knowledge of life to understand that this brilliant companion of his was base-born. His kind heart moved him to pity, but his intense pride curbed his pity with contempt. Vassia Kazán had resented the latter too bitterly to even be conscious of the first. The gentlemen assembled had diverted themselves by the unspoken feud that had soon risen between the boys, and the natural intelligence of the little Magyar noble had been no match for the subtle and cultured brain of the Parisian Lycéen.

One day one of the lovely ladies there, who plundered Zabarroff and caressed his son, amused herself with a war of words between the lads, and so heated, stung, spurred and tormented the Hungarian boy that, exasper-

ated by the sallies and satires of his foe, and by the presence of this lovely goddess of discord, he so far forgot his chivalry that he turned on Vassia with a taunt. 'You would be a serf if you were in Russia!' he said, with his great black eyes flashing the scorn of the noble on the bastard. Without a word, Vassia, who had come in from riding and had his whip in his hand, sprang on him, held him in a grip of steel, and thrashed him. The fiery Magyar, writhing under the blows of one who to him was as a slave, as a hound, freed his right arm, snatched from a table near an oriental dagger lying there with other things of value, and plunged it into the shoulder of his foe. The cries of the lady, alarmed at her own work, brought the men in from the adjoining room; the boys were forced apart and carried to their chambers.

Prince Vàsàrhely left the house that evening with his son, still furious and unappeased. Vassia Kazán remained, made a hero of and nursed by the lovely woman who had thrown the apple of strife. His wound was healed in three weeks' time; soon after his father's house-party was scattered, and he himself returned to his college. Not a syllable passed between him and Zabaroff as to his quarrel with the little Hungarian magnate. To the woman who had

wrought the mischief Zabaroff said: 'Almost I wish he were my lawful son. He is a true wolf of the steppes. Paris has only combed his hide and given him a silken coat; he is still a wolf, like all true Russians.'

Looking on the sleeping child of Sabran, all that half-forgotten scene had risen up before the eyes of Egon Vàsàrhely. He seemed to see the beautiful fair face of Vassia Kazán, with the anger on the knitted brows, and the ferocity on the delicate stern lips as he had raised his arm to strike. Twenty years had gone by; he himself, whenever he had remembered the scene, had long grown ashamed of the taunt he had cast, not of the blow he had given, for the sole reproof his father had ever made him was to say: 'A noble only insults his equals. To insult an inferior is ungenerous, it is derogatory; whom you offend you raise for the hour to a level with yourself. Remember to choose your foes not less carefully than you choose your friends.'

Why with the regard, the voice, the air of Sabran had some vague intangible remembrance always come before him?

Why, as he had gazed on the sleeping child had the vague uncertainty suddenly resolved itself into distinct revelation?

'He is Vassia Kazán! He is Vassia Kazán!'

he said to himself a score of times stupidly, persistently, as one speaks in a dream. Yet he knew he must be a prey to delusion, to phantasy, to accidental resemblance. He told himself so. He resisted his own folly, and all the while a subtler inner consciousness seemed to be speaking in him, and saying to him :

‘That man is Vassia Kazán. Surely he is Vassia Kazán.’

And then the loyal soul of him strengthened itself and made him think :

‘Even if he be Vassia Kazán he is her husband. He is what she loves ; he is the father of those children that are hers.’

He never went to his bed that night. When the music ceased at an hour before dawn, and the great house grew silent, he still sat there by the open casement, glad of the cold air that blew in from over the Szalrassee, as with day-break a fine film of rain began to come down the mountain sides.

Once he heard the voice of Sabran, who passed the door on his way to his own apartment. Sabran was saying in German with a little laugh :

‘My lady ! I am jealous of your crown prince. When I left him now in his chamber I was disposed to immortalise myself by regicide. He adores you !’

Then he heard Wanda laugh in answer, with some words that did not reach his ear as they passed on further down the corridor. Vàsàrhely shivered, and instinctively rose to his feet. He felt as if he must seek him out and cry out to him:

‘Am I mad or is it true? Let me see your shoulder—have you the mark of the wound that I gave? Your little child has the face of Vassia Kazán. Are you Vassia Kazán? Are you the bastard of Zabaroff? Are you the wolf of the steppes?’

He had desired to go from Hohenszalras, where every hour was pain to him, but now he felt an irresistible fascination in the vicinity of Sabran. His mind was in that dual state which at once rejects a fact as incredible, and believes in it absolutely. His reason told him that his suspicion was a folly; his instinct told him that it was a truth.

When in the forenoon the castle again became animated, and the guests met to the mid-day breakfast in the hall of the knights, he descended, moved by an eagerness that made him for the first time in his life nervous. When Sabran addressed him he felt himself grow pale; he followed the movements, he watched the features, he studied the tones of his successful rival, with an intense absorption in them.

Through the hunting breakfast, at which only men were present, he was conscious of nothing that was addressed to him; he only seemed to hear a voice in his ear saying perpetually—‘Yonder is Vassia Kazán.’

The day was spent in sport, sport rough and real, that gave fair play to the beasts and perilous exposure to the hunters. For the first time in his life, Egon Vàsàrhely let a brown bear go by him untouched, and missed more than one roebuck. His eyes were continually seeking his host; a mile off down a forest glade the figure of Sabran seemed to fill his vision, a figure full of grace and dignity, clad in a hunting-dress of russet velvet, with a hunting-horn slung at his side on a broad chain of gold, the gift of his wife in memory of the fateful day when he had aimed at the *kuttengeier* in her woods.

Sabran of necessity devoted himself to the crown prince throughout the day’s sport; only in the twilight as they returned he spoke to Vàsàrhely.

‘Wanda is so full of regret that you wish to leave us,’ he said, with graceful cordiality; ‘if only I can persuade you to remain, I shall take her the most welcome of all tidings from the forest. Stay at the least another week, the weather has cleared.’

As he spoke he thought that Vàsàrhely looked at him strangely ; but he knew that he could not be much loved by his wife's cousin, and continued with good humour to persist in his request. Abruptly, the other answered him at last.

‘Wanda wishes me to stay? Well, I will stay then. It seems strange to hear a stranger invite *me* to Hohenszalras.’

Sabran coloured ; he said with hauteur :

‘That I am a stranger to Prince Vàsàrhely is not my fault. That I have the right to invite him to Hohenszalras is my happiness, due to his cousin's goodness, which has been far beyond my merit.’

Vàsàrhely's eyes dwelt on him gloomily ; he was sensible of the dignity, the self-command, and the delicacy of reproof which were blent in the answer he had received ; he felt humbled and convicted of ill-breeding. He said after a pause :

‘I should ask your pardon. My cousin would be the first to condemn my words ; they sounded ill, but I meant them literally. Hohenszalras has been one of my homes from boyhood ; it will be your son's when we are both dead. How like he is to you ; he has nothing of his mother.’

Sabran, somewhat surprised, smiled as he answered :

‘He is very like me. I regret it; but you know the poets and the physiologists are for once agreed as to the cause of that. It is a truth proved a million times: *l’enfant de l’amour ressemble toujours au père.*’

Egon Vásárhely grew white under the olive hue of his sun-bronzed cheek. The *riposte* had been made with a thrust that went home. Otto at that moment approached his master for orders for the morrow. They were no more alone. They entered the house; the long and ceremonious dinner succeeded. Vàsàrhely was silent and stern. Sabran was the most brilliant of hosts, the happiest of men; all the women present were in love with him, his wife the most of all.

‘Réné tells me you will stay, Egon. I am so very glad,’ his cousin said to him during the evening, and she added with a little hesitation, ‘If you would take time to know him well, you would find him so worthy of your regard; he has all the qualities that most men esteem in each other. It would make me so happy if you were friends at heart, not only in mere courtesy.’

‘You know that can never be,’ said Vàsàrhely, almost rudely. ‘Even you cannot work miracles. He is your husband. It is a reason that I should respect him,

but it is also a reason why I shall for ever hate him.'

He said the last words in a tone scarcely audible, but low as it was, there was a force in it that affected her painfully.

'What you say there is quite unworthy of you,' she said with gentleness but coldness. 'He has done you no wrong. Long ere I met him I told you that what you wished was not what I wished, never would be so. You are too great a gentleman, Egon, to nourish an injustice in your heart.'

He looked down; every fibre in him thrilled and burned under the sound of her voice, the sense of her presence.

'I saw your children asleep last night,' he said abruptly. 'They have nothing of you in them; they are his image.'

'Is it so unusual for children to resemble their father?' she said with a smile, whilst vaguely disquieted by his tone.

'No, I suppose not; but the Szalras have always been of one type. How came your husband by that face? I have seen it amongst the Circassians, the Persians, the Georgians; but you say he is a Breton.'

'The Sabrans of Romaris are Bretons; you have only to consult history. Very beautiful faces like his have seldom much impress of

nationality; they always seem as though they followed the old Greek laws, and were cast in the divine heroic mould of another time than ours.'

'Who was his mother?'

'A Spanish Mexican.'

Vasàrhely was silent.

His cousin left him and went amongst her guests. A vague sense of uneasiness went with her at her consciousness of his hostility to Sabran. She wished she had not asked him to remain.

'You have never offended Egon?' she asked Sabran anxiously that night. 'You have always been forbearing and patient with him?'

'I have obeyed you in that as all things, my angel,' he answered her lightly. 'What would you? He is in love with you still, and I have married you! It is even a crime in his eyes that my children resemble me! One can never argue with a passion that is unhappy. It is a kind of frenzy.'

She heard with some impatience.

'He has no right to cherish such a resentment. He keeps it alive by brooding on it. I had hoped that when he saw you here, saw how happy you render me, saw your children too, he would grow calmer, wiser, more reconciled to the inevitable.'

‘You did not know men, my love,’ said Sabran, with a smile.

To him the unhappiness and the ill-will of Egon Vàsàrhely were matters of supreme indifference; in a manner they gratified him, they even supplied that stimulant of rivalry which a man’s passion needs to keep at its height in the calm of safe possession. That Egon Vàsàrhely saw his perfect happiness lent it pungency and a keener sense of victory. When he kissed his wife’s hand in the sight of her cousin, the sense of the pain it dealt to the spectator gave the trivial action to him all the sweetness and the ardour of the first caresses of his accepted passion.

Of that she knew nothing. It would have seemed to her ignoble, as so much that makes up men’s desire always does seem to a woman of her temperament, even whilst it dominates and solicits her, and forces her to share something of its own intoxication.

‘Egon is very unreasonable,’ said Mdme. Ottilie. ‘He believes that if you had not met René you would have in time loved himself. It is foolish. Love is a destiny. Had you married him you would not have loved him. He would soon have perceived that and been miserable, much more miserable than he is now, for he would have been unable to release you.’

I think he should not have come here at all if he could not have met M. de Sabran with at least equanimity.'

'I think so, too,' said Wanda, and an impatience against her cousin began to grow into anger; without being conscious of it, she had placed Sabran so high in her own esteem that she could forgive none who did not adore her own idol. It was a weakness in her that was lovely and touching in a character that had had before hardly enough of the usual foibles of humanity. Every error of love is lovable.

Vàsàrhely could not dismiss from his mind the impression which haunted him.

'I conclude you knew the Marquis de Sabran well in France?' he said one day to Baron Kaulnitz, who was still there.

Kaulnitz demurred.

'No, I cannot say that I did. I knew him by repute; that was not very pure. However, the Faubourg always received and sustained him; the Comte de Chambord did the same; they were the most interested. One cannot presume to think they could be deceived.'

'Deceived!' echoed Prince Egon. 'What a singular word to use. Do you mean to imply the possibility of—of any falsity on his part—any intrigue to appear what he is not?'

‘No,’ said Kaulnitz, with hesitation. ‘Honestly, I cannot say so much. An impression was given me at the moment of his signing his marriage contract that he concealed something; but it was a mere suspicion. As I told you, the whole Legitimist world, the most difficult to enter, the most incredulous of assumption, received him with open arms. All his papers were of unimpeachable regularity. There was never a doubt hinted by anyone, and yet I will confess to you, my dear Egon, since we are speaking in confidence, that I have had always my own doubts as to his marquisate of Sabran.’

‘*Grosser Gott!*’ exclaimed Vàsàrhely, as he started from his seat. ‘Why did you not stop the marriage?’

‘One does not stop a marriage by a mere baseless suspicion,’ replied Kaulnitz. ‘I have not one shadow of reason for my probably quite unwarranted conjecture. It merely came into my mind also at the signing of the contracts. I had already done all I could to oppose the marriage, but Wanda was inflexible—you are witness of the charm he still possesses for her—and even the Princess was scarcely less infatuated. Besides, it must be granted that few men are more attractive in every way; and as he is one of us, whatever else he be, his

honour is now our honour, as you said yourself the other day.'

'One could always kill him,' muttered Vàsàrhely, 'and set her free so, if one were sure.'

'Sure of what?' said Kaulnitz, rather alarmed at the effect of his own words. 'You Magyar gentlemen always think that every knot can be cut with a sword. If he were a mere adventurer (which is hardly possible) it would not mend matters for you to run him through the heart; there are his children.'

'Would the marriage be legal if his name were assumed?'

'Oh, no! She could have it annulled, of course, both by Church and Law. All those pretty children would have no rights and no name. But we are talking very wildly and in a theatrical fashion. He is as certainly Marquis de Sabran as I am Karl von Kaulnitz.'

Vàsàrhely said nothing; his mind was in tumult, his heart oppressed by a sense of secresy and of a hope that was guilty and mean.

He did not speak to his companion of Vassia Kazán, but his conjecture seemed to hover before his sight like a black cloud which grew bigger every hour.

He remained at Hohenszalras throughout

the autumnal festivities. He felt as if he could not go away with that doubt still unsolved, that suspicion either confirmed or uprooted. His cousin grew as uneasy at his presence there as she had before been uneasy at his absence. Her instinct told her that he was the foe of the one dearest to her on earth. She felt that the gallant and generous temper of him had changed and grown morose ; he was taciturn, moody, solitary.

He spent almost all his time out of doors, and devoted himself to the hardy sport of the mountains and forests with a sort of rage. Guests came and went at the castle ; some were imperial, some royal people ; there was always a brilliant circle of notable persons there, and Sabran played his part as their host with admirable tact, talent, and good humour. His wit, his amiability, his many accomplishments, and his social charm were in striking contrast to the sombre indifference of Vàsàrhely, whom men had no power to amuse and women no power to interest. Prince Egon was like a magnificent picture by Rembrandt, as he sat in his superb uniform in a corner of a ball-room with the collars of his orders blazing with jewels, and his hands crossed on the diamond-studded hilt of his sword ; but he was so mute, so gloomy, so austere, that the vainest coquette

there ceased to hope to please him, and his most cordial friends found his curt contemptuous replies destroy their desire for his companionship.

Wanda, who was frankly and fondly attached to him, began to long for his departure. The gaze of his black eyes, fixed in their fire and gloom on the little gay figures of her children, filled her with a vague apprehension.

‘If he would only find some one and be happy,’ she thought, with anger at this undesired and criminal love which clung to her so persistently.

‘Am I made of wax?’ he said to her with scorn, when she ventured to hint at her wishes.

‘How I wish I had not asked him to remain here!’ she said to herself many times. It was not possible for her to dismiss her cousin, who had been from his infancy accustomed to look on the Hohensalrasburg as his second home. But as circle after circle of guests came, went, and were replaced by others, and Egon Vàsàrhely still retained the rooms in the west tower that had been his from boyhood, his continual presence grew irksome and irritating to her.

‘He forgets that it is now my husband’s house!’ she thought.

There was only one living creature in all the place to whom Vàsàrhely unbent from his

sullen and haughty reserve, and that one was the child Bela.

Bela was as beautiful as the morning, with his shower of golden hair, and his eyes like sapphires, and his skin like a lily. With curious self-torture Vàsàrhely would attract the child to him by tales of daring and of sport, and would watch with intent eyes every line of the small face, trying therein to read the secret of the man by whom this child had been begotten. Bela, all unconscious, was proud of this interest displayed in him by this mighty soldier, of whose deeds in war Ulrich and Hubert and Otto told such Homeric tales.

‘Bela will fight with you when he is big,’ he would say, trying to inclose the jewelled hilt of Vàsàrhely’s sword in his tiny fingers, or trotting after him through the silence of the tapestried corridors. When she saw them thus together she felt that she could understand the superstitious fear of oriental women when their children are looked at fixedly.

‘You are very good to my boy,’ she said once to Vàsàrhely, when he had let the child chatter by his side for hours.

Vàsàrhely turned away abruptly.

‘There are times when I could kill your son, because he is his,’ he muttered, ‘and there

are times when I could worship him, because he is yours.'

'Do not talk so, Egon,' she said, gravely. 'If you will feel so, it is best—I must say it—it is best that you should see neither my child nor me.'

He took no notice of her words.

'The children would always be yours,' he muttered. 'You would never leave him, never disgrace him for their sake; even if one knew—it would be of no use.'

'Dear Egon,' she said, in real distress, 'what strange things are you saying? Are you mad? Whose disgrace do you mean?'

'Let us suppose an extreme case,' he said, with a hard laugh. 'Suppose their father were base, or vile, or faithless, would you hate the children? Surely you would.'

'I have not imagination enough to suppose any such thing,' she said very coldly. 'And you do not know what a mother's love is, my cousin.'

He walked away, leaving her abruptly.

'How strange he grows!' she thought. 'Surely his mind must be touched; jealousy is a sort of madness.'

She bade the children's attendants keep Count Bela more in the nurseries; she told them that the child teased her guests, and must

not be allowed to run so often at his will and whim over the house. She never seriously feared that Egon would harm the child: his noble and chivalrous nature could not have changed so cruelly as that; but it hurt her to see his eyes fixed on the son of Sabran with such persistent interrogation and so strange an intensity of observation. It made her think of old Italian tales of the evil eye.

She did not know that Väsàrhely had come thither with a sincere and devout intention to conquer his jealous hatred of her husband, and to habituate himself to the sight of her in the new relations of her life. She did not know that he would probably have honestly tried to do his duty, and honestly striven to feel at least esteem for one so near to her, if the suspicion which had become almost certainty in his own mind had not made him believe that he saw in Sabran a traitor, a bastard, and a criminal whose offences were the deepest of all possible offences, and whose degradation was the lowest of all possible degradation, in the sight of the haughty magnate of Hungary, steeped to the lips in all the traditions and the convictions of an unsullied nobility. If what he believed were, indeed, the truth, he would hold Sabran lower than any beggar crouching at the gate of his palace in Buda, than any gipsy wandering in

the woods of his mountain fortress of Taróc. If what he believed were the truth, no leper would seem to him so loathsome as this brilliant and courtly gentleman to whom his cousin had given her hand, her honour, and her life.

‘Doubt, like a raging tooth,’ gnawed at his heart, and a hope, which he knew was dishonourable to his chivalry, sprang up in him, vague, timid, and ashamed. If, indeed, it were as he believed, would not such crime, proven on the sinner, part him for ever from the pure, proud life of Wanda von Szalras? And then, as he thought thus, he groaned in spirit, remembering the children—the children with their father’s face and their father’s taint in them, for ever living witnesses of their mother’s surrender to a lying hound.

‘Your cousin cannot be said to contribute to the gaiety of your house parties, my love,’ Sabran observed with a smile one day, when they received the announcement of an intended visit from one of the archdukes. Egon Vàsàrhely was still there, and even his cousin, much as she longed for his departure, could not openly urge it upon him; relationship and hospitality alike forbade.

‘He is sadly changed,’ she answered. ‘He was always silent, but he is now morose. Per-

haps he lives too much at Taróc, where all is very wild and solitary.'

'He lives too much in your memory,' said Sabran, with no compassion. 'Could he determine to forgive my marriage with you, there would be a chance for him to recover his peace of mind. Only, my Wanda, it is not possible for any man to be consoled for the loss of you.'

'But that is nothing new,' she answered, with impatience. 'If he felt so strongly against you, why did he come here? It was not like his high, chivalrous honour.'

'Perhaps he came with the frank will to be reconciled to his fate,' said Sabran, not knowing how closely he struck the truth, 'and at the sight of you, of all that he lost and that I gained, he cannot keep his resolution.'

'Then he should go away,' she said, with that indifference to all others save the one beloved which all love begets.

'I think he should. But who can tell him so?'

'I did myself the other day. I shall tell him so more plainly, if needful. Who cannot honour you shall be no friend of mine, no guest of ours.'

'Oh, my love!' said Sabran, whose conscience was touched. 'Do not have feud with

your relatives for my sake. They are worthier than I.'

The Archduke, with his wife, arrived there on the following day, and Hohenszalras was gorgeous in the September sun, with all the pomp with which the lords of it had always welcomed their Imperial friends. Väsàrhely looked on as a spectator at a play when he watched its present master receive the Imperial Prince with that supreme ease, grace, and dignity which were so admirably blent in him.

'Can he be but a marvellous comedian?' wondered the man, to whom a bastard was less even than a peasant.

There was nothing of vanity, of effort, of assumption visible in the perfect manner of his host. He seemed to the backbone, in all the difficult subtleties of society, as in the simple, frank intercourse of man and man, that which even Kaulnitz had conceded that he was, *gentil-homme de race*. Could he have been born a serf—bred from the hour's caprice of a voluptuary for a serving-woman?

Väsàrhely sat mute, sunk so deeply in his own thoughts that all the festivities round him went by like a pageantry on a stage, in which he had no part.

'He looks like the statue of the Commendatore,' said Olga Brancka, who had returned

for the archducal visit, as she glanced at the sombre, stately figure of her brother-in-law, Sabran, to whom she spoke, laughed with a little uneasiness. Would the hand of Egon Vàsàrhely ever seize him and drag him downward like the hand of the statue in *Don Giovanni*?

‘What a pity that Wanda did not marry him, and that I did not marry you!’ said Mdme. Brancka, saucily, but with a certain significance of meaning.

‘You do me infinite honour!’ he answered. ‘But, at the risk of seeming most ungallant, I must confess the truth. I am grateful that the gods arranged matters as they are. You are enchanting, Madame Olga, as a guest, but as a wife—alas! who can drink *kümmel* every day?’

She smiled enchantingly, showing her pretty teeth, but she was bitterly angered. She had wished for a compliment at the least. ‘What can these men see in Wanda?’ she thought savagely. ‘She is handsome, it is true; but she has no coquetry, no animation, no passion. She is dressed by Worth, and has a marvellous quantity of old jewels; but for that no one would say anything of her except that she was much too tall and had a German face!’ And she persuaded herself that it was so; if the Venus

de Medici could be animated into life, women would only remark that her waist was large.

Mdme. Olga was still very lovely, and took care to be never seen except at her loveliest. She always treated Sabran with a great familiarity, which his wife was annoyed by, though she did not display her annoyance. Mdme. Brancka always called him *mon cousin* or *beau cousin* in the language she usually used, and affected much more previous knowledge of him than their acquaintance warranted, since it had been merely such slight intimacy as results from moving in the same society. She was small and slight, but of great spirit; she shot, fished, rode, and played billiards with equal skill; she affected an adoration of the most dangerous sports, and even made a point of sharing the bear and the boar hunt. Wanda, who, though a person of much greater real courage, abhorred all the cruelties and ferocities that perforce accompany sport, saw her with some irritation go out with Sabran on these expeditions.

‘Women are utterly out of place in such sport as that, Olga,’ she urged to her; ‘and indeed are very apt to bring the men into peril, for of course no man can take care of himself whilst he has the safety of a woman to attend to; she must of necessity distract and trouble him.’

But the Countess Stefan only laughed, and slipped with affectation her jewelled hunting-knife into its place in her girdle.

Throughout the Archduke's visit, and after the Prince's departure, Vàsàrhely continued to stay on, whilst a succession of other guests came and went, and the summer deepened into autumn. He felt that he could not leave his cousin's house with that doubt unsolved; yet he knew that he might stay on for ever with no more certainty to reward him and confirm his suspicions than he possessed now. His presence annoyed his host, but Sabran was too polished a gentleman to betray his irritation; sometimes Vàsàrhely shunned his presence and his conversation for days together, at other times he sought them, and rode with him, shot with him, and played cards with him, in the vain hope of gathering from some chance admission or allusion some clue to Sabran's early days. But a perfectly happy man is not given at any time to retrospection, and Sabran less than most men loved his past. He would gladly have forgotten everything that he had ever done or said before his marriage at the Hofburg.

The intellectual powers and accomplishments of Sabran dazzled Vàsàrhely with a saddened sense of inferiority. Like most great soldiers he

had a genuine humility in his measurement of himself. He knew that he had no talents except as a leader of cavalry. 'It is natural that she never looked at me,' he thought, 'when she had once seen this man, with his wit, his grace, his facility.' He could not even regard the skill of Sabran in the arts, in the salon, in the theatre with the contempt which the 'Wild Boar of Taróc' might have felt for a mere maker of music, a squire of dames, a writer of sparkling little comedies, a painter of screens, because he knew that both at Idrac and in France Sabran had showed himself the possessor of those martial and virile qualities, by the presence or the absence of which the Hungarian noble measured all men. He himself could only love well and live well: he reflected sadly that honesty and honour are not alone enough to draw love in return.

As the weeks passed on, his host grew so accustomed to his presence there that it ceased to give him offence or cause him anxiety.

'He is not amusing, and he is not always polite,' he said to his wife, 'but if he likes to consume his soul in gazing at you, I am not jealous, my Wanda; and so taciturn a rival would hardly ever be a dangerous one.'

'Do not jest about it,' she answered him, with some real pain. 'I should be very vexed

at his remaining here, were it not that I feel sure he will in time learn to live down his regrets, and to esteem and appreciate you.'

'Who knows but his estimation of me may not be the right one?' said Sabran, with a pang of sad self-knowledge. And although he did not attach any significance to the prolonged sojourn of the lord of Taróc and Mohacs, he began to desire once more that his guest would return to the solitudes of the Carlowitz vineyards, or of the Karpathian mountains and gorges of snow.

When over seven weeks had passed by, Vàsàrhely himself began to think that to stay in the Iselthal was useless and impossible, and he had heard from Taróc tidings which annoyed him—that his brother Stefan and his wife, availing themselves of his general permission to visit any one of his places when they chose, had so strained the meaning of the permission that they had gone to his castle, with a score of their Parisian friends, and were there keeping high holiday and festival, to the scandal of his grave old stewards, and their own exceeding diversion. Hospitable to excess as he was, the liberty displeased him, especially as his men wrote him word that his favourite horses were being ruined by over-driving, and in the list of the guests which they sent him were

the names of more than one too notorious lady, against whose acquaintance he had repeatedly counselled Olga Brancka. He would not have cared much what they had done at any other of his houses, but at Taróc, his mother, whom he had adored, had lived and died, and the place was sacred to him.

He determined to tear himself away from Hohenszalras, and go and scatter these gay unbidden revellers in the dusky Karpethian ravines. 'I cannot stay here for ever,' he thought, 'and I might be here for years without acquiring any more certainty than my own conviction. Either I am wrong, or he has nothing to conceal, or if I be right he is too wary to betray himself. If only I could see his shoulder where I struck the dagger—but I cannot go into his bath-room and say to him, "You are Vassia Kazán!"'

He resolved to leave on the day after the morrow. For the next day there was organised on a large scale a hunting party, to which the nobility of the Tauern had been bidden. There were only some half-dozen men then staying in the Burg, most of them Austrian soldiers. The delay gave him the chance he longed for, which but for an accident he might never have had, though he had tarried there half a century.

Early in the morning there was a great

breakfast in the Rittersaal, at which Wanda did not appear. Sabran received the nobles and gentry of the province, and did the honours of his table with his habitual courtliness and grace. He was not hospitable in Väsàrhely's sense of the word : he was too easily wearied by others, and too contemptuous of ordinary humanity ; but he was alive to the pleasure of being lord of Hohenszalras, and sensible of the favour with which he was looked upon by a nobility commonly so exclusive and intolerant of foreign invasion.

Breakfast over, the whole party went out and up into the high woods. The sport at Hohenszalras always gave fair play to beast and bird. In deference to the wishes of his wife, Sabran would have none of those battues which make of the covert or the forest a slaughter-house. He himself disdained that sort of sport, and liked danger and adventure to mingle with his out-of-door pastimes. Game fairly found by the spaniel or the pointer ; the boar, the wolf, the bear, honestly started and given its fair chance of escape or revenge ; the steinbock stalked in a long hard day with peril and effort—these were all delightful to him on occasion ; but for the crowded drive, the horde of beaters, the terrified bewildered troop of forest denizens driven with sticks on to the very barrels of the gunners, for this he had the boundless contempt

of a man who had chased the buffalo over the prairie, and lassoed the wild horse and the wild bull leaning down from the saddle of his mustang. The day passed off well, and his guests were all content: he alone was not, because a large brown bear which he had sighted and fired at twice had escaped him, and roused that blood-lust in him which is in the hearts of all men.

‘Will you come out alone with me to-morrow and try for that grand brute?’ he said to Väsàrhely, as the last of his guests took their departure.

Väsàrhely hesitated.

‘I intended to leave to-morrow; I have been here too long. But since you are so good, I will stay twenty-four hours longer.’

He was ashamed in his own heart of the willingness with which he caught at the excuse to remain within sight of his cousin and within watch of Sabran.

‘I am charmed,’ said his host, in himself regretful that he had suggested a reason for delay; he had not known that the other had intended to leave so soon. They remained together on the terrace giving directions to the *jägermeister* for the next day.

Väsàrhely looked at his successful rival and said to himself: ‘It is impossible. I must be

mad to dream it. I am misled by a mere chance resemblance, and even my own memory may have deceived me ; I was but a child.'

In the forenoon they both went out into the high hills again, where the wild creatures had their lairs and were but seldom troubled by a rifle-shot. They brought down some black grouse and hazel grouse and mountain partridges on their upward way. The jägers were scattered in the woods ; the day was still and cloudy, a true sportsman's day, with no gleam of sun to shine in their eyes and on the barrels of their rifles. Sabran shooting to the right, Väsàrhely to the left, they went through the grassy drives that climbed upward and upward, and many a mountain hare was rolled over in their path, and many a ptarmigan and capercailzie. But when they reached the high pine forests where the big game harboured, they ceased to shoot, and advanced silently, waiting and reserving their fire for any large beast the jägers might start and drive towards them from above. In the greyness of the day the upper woods were almost dusky, so thickly stood the cembras and the Siberian pines. There was everywhere the sound of rushing waters, some above, some underground.

'The first beast to you, the second to me,' said Sabran, in a whisper to his companion, who

demurred and declared that the first fire should be his host's.

'No,' said Sabran. 'I am at home. Permit me so small a courtesy to my guest.'

Vàsàrhely flushed darkly. In his very politeness this man seemed to him to contrive to sting and wound him.

Sabran, however, who had meant nothing more than he had said, did not observe the displeasure he had caused, and paused at the spot agreed upon with Otto, a grassy spot where four drives met. There they both in absolute silence waited and watched for what the hunter's patron, good S. Hubert, might vouchsafe to send them. They had so waited about a quarter of an hour, when down one of the drives made dusky by the low hanging arolla boughs, there came towards them a great dark beast, and would have gone by them had not Vàsàrhely fired twice as it approached. The bear rolled over, shot through the head and heart.

'Well done,' cried Sabran, but scarcely were the words off his lips when another bear burst through the boughs ahead of him by fifty yards. He levelled his rifle and received its approach with two bullets in rapid succession. But neither had entered a vital part, and the animal, only rendered furious by pain, reared

and came towards him with deadliest intent, its great fangs grinning. He fired again, and this shot struck home. The poor brute fell with a crash, the blood pouring from its mouth. It was not dead and its agony was great.

‘I will give it the *coup de grâce*,’ said Sabran, who, for his wife’s sake, was as humane as any hunter ever can be to the beasts he slew.

‘Take care,’ said Väsàrhely. ‘It is dangerous to touch a wounded bear. I have known one that looked stone dead rise up and kill a man.’

Sabran did not heed. He went up to the poor, panting, groaning mass of fur and flesh, and drew his hunting-knife to give it the only mercy that it was now possible for it to receive. But as he stooped to plunge the knife into its heart the bear verified the warning he had been given. Gathering all its oozing strength in one dying effort to avenge its murder, it leaped on him, dashed him to the earth, and clung to him with claw and tooth fast in his flesh. He freed his right arm from its ponderous weight, its horrible grip, and stabbed it with his knife as it clung to and lacerated him where he lay upon the grass. In an instant, Väsàrhely and the jäger who was with them were by his side, freed him from the animal, and raised him

from the ground. He was deluged with its blood and his own. Vàsàrhely, for one moment of terrible joy, for which he loathed himself afterwards, thought, 'Is he dead?' Men had died of lesser things than this.

He stood erect and smiled, and said that it was nothing, but even as he spoke a faintness came over him, and his lips turned grey.

The jäger supported him tenderly, and would have had him sit down upon a boulder of rock, but he resisted.

'Let me get to that water,' he said feebly, looking to a spot a few yards off, where one of the many torrents of the Hohe Tauern tumbled from the wooded cliff above through birch and beechwood, and rushing underground left a clear round brown pool amongst the ferns. He took a draught from the flask of brandy: tendered him by the lad, and leaning on the youth, and struggling against the sinking swoon that was coming on him, walked to the edge of the pool, and dropped down there on one of the mossy stones which served as a rough chair.

'Strip me, and wash the blood away,' he said to the huntsman, whilst the green wood, and the daylight, and the face of the man grew dim to him, and seemed to recede further and further in a misty darkness. The youth obeyed,

and cut away the velvet coat, the cambric shirt, till he was naked to his waist; then, making sponges of handkerchiefs, the jäger began to wash the blood from him and staunch it as best he could.

Egon Väsàrhely stood by, without offering any aid; his eyes were fastened on the magnificent bust of Sabran, as the sunlight fell on the fair blue-veined flesh, the firm muscles, the symmetrical throat, the slender, yet sinewy arms, round one of which was clasped a bracelet of fair hair. He had the chance he needed.

He approached and told the lad roughly to leave the Marquis to him, he was doing him more harm than good; he himself had seen many battle-fields, and many men bleeding to death upon their mother earth. By this time Sabran's eyes were closed; he was hardly conscious of anything, a great numbness and infinite exhaustion had fallen upon him; his lips moved feebly. 'Wanda!' he said once or twice, 'Wanda!'

The face of the man who leaned above him grew dark as night; he gnashed his teeth as he begun his errand of mercy.

'Leave me with your lord,' he said to the young jäger. 'Go you to the castle. Find Herr Greswold, bring him; do not alarm the Countess, and say nothing to the household.'

The huntsman went, fleet as a roe. Vàsàrhely remained alone with Sabran, who only heard the sound of the rushing water magnified a million times on his dulled ear.

Vàsàrhely tore the shirt in shreds, and laved and bathed the wounds, and then began to bind them with the skill of a soldier who had often aided his own wounded troopers. But first of all, when he had washed the blood away, he searched with keen and eager eyes for a scar on the white skin—and found it.

On the right shoulder was a small triangular mark ; the mark of what, to a soldier's eyes, told of an old wound. When he saw it he smiled a cruel smile, and went on with his work of healing.

Sabran leaned against the rock behind him ; his eyes were still closed, the pulsations of his heart were irregular. He had lost a great quantity of blood, and the pool at his feet was red. They were but flesh wounds, and there was no danger in them themselves, but great veins had been severed, and the stream of life had hurried forth in torrents. Vàsàrhely thrust the flask between his lips, but he could not swallow.

All had been done that could be for the immediate moment. The stillness of the deep woods was around them ; the body of the brown bear lay on the soaked grass ; a vulture,

scenting death, was circling above against the blue sky. Over the mind of his foe swept at the sight of them one of those hideous temptations which assail the noblest natures in an hour of hatred. If he tore the bandages he had placed there off the rent veins of the unconscious man whom he watched, the blood would leap out again in floods, and so weaken the labouring heart that in ten minutes more its powers would fall so low that all aid would be useless. Never more would the lips of Sabran meet his wife! Never more would his dreams be dreamed upon her breast! For the moment the temptation seemed to curl about him like a flame; he shuddered, and crossed himself. Was he a soldier to slay in cold blood by treachery a powerless rival?

He leaned over Sabran again, and again tried to force the mouthpiece of his wine-flask through his teeth. A few drops passed them, and he revived a little, and swallowed a few drops more. The blood was arrested in its escape, and the pulsations of the heart were returning to their normal measure; after a while he unclosed his eyes, and looked up at the green leaves, at the blue sky.

‘Do not alarm Wanda,’ he said feebly. ‘It is a scratch; it will be nothing. Take me home.’

With his left hand he felt for the hair bracelet on his right arm, between the shoulder and the wrist. It was stiff with his own blood.

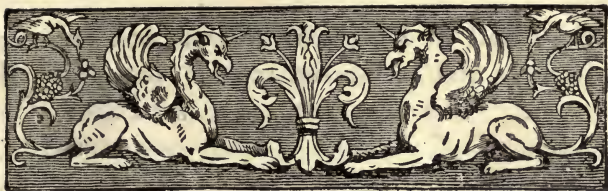
Then Vàsàrhely leaned over him and met his upward gaze, and said in his ear, that seemed still filled with the rushing of many waters, 'You are Vassia Kazán !'

When a little later the huntsman returned, bringing the physician, whom he had met a mile nearer the house in the woods, and some peasants bearing a litter made out of pine branches and wood moss, they found Sabran stretched insensible beside the water-pool ; and Egon Vàsàrhely, who stood erect beside him, said in a strange tone :

'I have stanchèd the blood, and he has swooned, you see. I commit him to your hands. I am not needed.'

And, to their surprise, he turned and walked away with swift steps into the green gloom of the dense forest.





CHAPTER XIX.

SABRAN was still insensible when he was carried to the house.

When he regained consciousness he was on his own bed, and his wife was bending over him. A convulsion of grief crossed his face as he lifted his eyelids and looked at her.

‘Wanda,’ he murmured feebly, ‘Wanda, you will forgive——’

She kissed him passionately, while her tears fell like rain upon his forehead. She did not hear his words distinctly; she was only alive to the intense joy of his recovered consciousness, of the sound of his voice, of the sense of his safety. She knelt by his bed, covering his hands with caresses, prodigal of a thousand names of love, given up to an abandonment of

terror and of hope which broke down all the serenity and self-command of her habitual temper. She was not even aware of the presence of others. The over-mastering emotions of anguish and of joy filled her soul, and made her seem deaf, indifferent to all living things save one.

Sabran lay motionless. He felt her lips, he heard her voice ; he did not look up again, nor did he speak again. He shut his eyes, and slowly remembered all that had passed. Greswold approached him and held his fingers on his wrist, and held a little glass to his mouth. Sabran put it away. 'It is an opiate,' he said feebly ; 'I will not have it.'

He was resolute ; he closed his teeth, he thrust the calming draught away.

He was thinking to himself : 'Sometimes in unconsciousness one speaks.'

'You are not in great pain?' asked the physician. He made a negative movement of his head. What were the fire and the smart of his lacerated flesh, of his torn muscles, to the torments of his fears, to the agony of his long stifled conscience?

'Do not torment him, let him be still,' she said to the physician ; she held his hand in both her own and pressed it to her heart. His languid eyes thanked her, then closed again.

Herr Greswold withdrew to a little distance and waited. It seemed to him strange that a man of the high courage and strong constitution of Sabran should be thus utterly broken down by any wound that was not mortal ; should be thus sunk into dejection and apathy, making no effort to raise himself, even to console and reassure his wife. It was not like his careless and gallant temper, his virile and healthful strength.

It was true, the doctor reflected, that he had lost a great amount of blood. Such a loss he knew sometimes affects the heart and shatters the nervous system in many unlooked-for ways. Yet, he thought, there was something beyond this ; the attitude and the regard of Egon Vàsàrhely had been unnatural at such an hour of peril. ‘ When he said just now “ forgive,” what did he mean ? ’ reflected the old man, whose ear had caught the word which had escaped that of Wanda, who had been only alive to the voice she adored.

The next four days were anxious and terrible. Sabran did not recover as the physician expected that he would, seeing the nature of his wounds and the naturally elastic and sanguine temperament he possessed. He slept little, had considerable fever, woke from the little rest he had, startled, alarmed, bathed in cold sweats ; at other times he lay still in an apathy almost

comatose, from which all the caresses and entreaties of his wife failed to rouse him. They began to fear that the discharge from the arteries had in some subtle and dangerous manner affected the action of the heart, the composition of the blood, and produced aneurism or pyæmia. 'The hero of Idrac to be prostrated by a mere flesh wound!' thought Herr Greswold in sore perplexity. He sent for a great man of science from Vienna, who, when he came, declared the treatment admirable, the wounds healthy, the heart in a normal state, but added it was evident the nervous system had received a severe shock, the effects of which still remained.

'But it is that which I cannot understand,' said the old man in despair. 'If you only knew the Marquis de Sabran as I know him; the most courageous, the most gay, the most resolute of men! A man to laugh at death in its face! A man absolutely without fear!'

The other assented.

'Every one knows what he did in the floods at Idrac,' he answered; 'but he has a sensitive temperament for all that. If you did not tell me it is impossible, I should say that he had had some mental shock, some great grief. The prostration seems to me more of the mind than the

body. But you have assured me it is impossible?'

'Impossible! There does not live on earth a man so happy, so fortunate, so blessed in all the world as he.'

'Men have a past that troubles them sometimes,' said the Vienna physician. 'Nay, I mean nothing, but I believe that M. de Sabran was a man of pleasure. The cup of pleasure sometimes has dregs that one must drink long afterwards. I do not mean anything; I merely suggest. The prostration has to my view its most probable origin in mental trouble; but it would do him more harm than good to excite him by any effort to certify this. To the Countess von Szalras I have merely said that his state is the result of the large loss of blood, and, indeed, after all it may be so.'

On the fifth day, Sabran, still lying in that almost comatose silence which had been scarcely broken since his accident, said in a scarce audible voice to his wife:

'Is your cousin here?'

She stooped towards him and answered:

'Yes; he is here, love. All the others went immediately, but Egon remained. I suppose he thought it looked kinder to do so. I have scarcely seen him, of course.'

The pallor of his face grew greyer ; he turned his head away restlessly.

‘Why does he not go?’ he muttered in his throat. ‘Does he wait for my death?’

‘Oh, René ! hush, hush !’ she said, with horror and amaze. ‘My love, how can you say such things? You are in no danger ; the doctor assures me so. In a week or two you will be well, you will be yourself.’

‘Send your cousin away.’

She hesitated ; troubled by his unreasoning, restless jealousy, which seemed to be the only consciousness of life remaining with him. ‘I will obey you, love ; you are lord here,’ she said softly ; ‘but will it not look strange? No guest can well be told to go.’

‘A guest !—he is an enemy !’

She sighed, knowing how hopelessly reason can struggle against the delusions of a sick bed. ‘I will tell him to go to-morrow,’ she said, to soothe him. ‘To-night it is too late.’

‘Write to him—do not leave me.’

There was a childlike appeal in his voice, that from a man so strong had a piteous pathos.

Her eyes swam with tears as she heard.

‘Oh, my dearest, I will not leave you !’ she said passionately, ‘not for one moment whilst I live ; and oh, my beloved ! what could

death ever change in *me*? Have you so little faith?’

‘You do not know,’ he said, so low that his breath scarcely stirred the air.

She thought that he was tormented by a doubt that she would not be faithful to him if he died. She stooped and kissed him.

‘My own, I would sooner be faithless to you in your life than after death. Surely you know me well enough to know that at the least?’

He was silent. A great sigh struggled from his breast and escaped his pale lips like a parting breath.

‘Kiss me again,’ he murmured; ‘kiss me again, whilst—— That gives me life,’ he said, as he drew her head down upon his bosom, where his heart throbbed labouredly. A little while later he fell asleep. He slept some hours. When he awoke he was consumed by a nameless fear.

‘Is your cousin gone?’ he asked.

She told him that it was one o’clock in the same night; she had not written yet.

‘Let him stay,’ he said feverishly. ‘He shall not think I fear him. Do you hear me? Let him stay.’

The words seemed to her the causeless caprice of a jealousy magnified and distorted

by the weakness of fever. She strove to answer him calmly. 'He shall go or stay as you please,' she assured him. 'What does it matter, dear, what Egon does? You always speak of Egon. You have never spoken of the children once.'

She wanted to distract his thoughts. She was pained to think how deep, though unspoken, his antagonism to her cousin must have been, that now in his feebleness it was the one paramount absorbing thought.

A great sadness came upon his face as she spoke; his lips trembled a little.

'Ah! the children,' he repeated. 'Yes, bring them to me to-morrow. Bela is too like me. Poor Bela, it will be his curse.'

'It is my joy of joys,' she murmured, afraid to see how his mind seemed astray.

A shudder that was almost a spasm passed over him. He did not reply. He turned his face away from her, and seemed to sleep.

The day following he was somewhat calmer, somewhat stronger, though his fever was high.

The species of paralysis that had seemed to fall on all his faculties had in a great measure left him. 'You wish me to recover,' he said to her. 'I will do so, though perhaps it were better not.'

'He says strange things,' she said to Gres-

would. 'I cannot think why he has such thoughts.'

'It is not he, himself, that has them, it is his fever,' answered the doctor. 'Why, in fever, do people often hate what they most adore when they are in health?'

She was reassured, but not contented.

The children were brought to see him. Bela had with him an ivory air-gun, with which he was accustomed to blow down his metal soldiers; he looked at his father with awed, dilated eyes, and said that he would go out with the gun and kill the brothers of the bear that had done the harm.

'The bear was quite right,' said Sabran. 'It was I who was wrong to take a life not my own.'

'That is beyond Bela,' said his wife. 'But I will translate it to him into language he shall understand, though I fear very much, say what I will, he will be a hunter and a soldier one day.'

Bela looked from one to the other, knitting his fair brows as he sat on the edge of the bed.

'Bela will be like Egon,' he said, 'with all gold and fur to dress up in, and a big jewelled sword, and ten hundred men and horses, and Bela will be a great killer of things!'

Sabran smiled languidly, but she saw that he flinched at her cousin's name.

‘I shall not love you, Bela, if you are a killer of things that are God’s dear creatures,’ she said, as she sent the child away.

His blue eyes grew dark with anger.

‘God only cares about Bela,’ he said in innocent profanity, with a profound sense of his own vastness in the sight of heaven, ‘and Gela,’ he added, with the condescending tenderness wherewith he always associated his brother and himself.

‘Where could he get all that overwhelming pride?’ she said, as he was led away. ‘I have tried to rear him so simply. Do what I may he will grow arrogant and selfish.’

‘My dear,’ said Sabran, very bitterly, ‘what avails that he was borne in your bosom? He is my son!’

‘Gela is your son, and he is so different,’ she answered, not seeking to combat the self-censure to which she was accustomed in him, and which she attributed to faults or follies of a past life, magnified by a conscience too sensitive.

‘He is all yours then,’ he said, with a wan smile. ‘You have prevailed over evil.’

In a few days later his recovery had progressed so far that he had regained his usual

tone and look ; his wounds were healing, and his strength was returning. He seemed to the keen eyes of Greswold to have made a supreme effort to conquer the moral depression into which he had sunk, and to have thrust away his malady almost by force of will. As he grew better he never spoke of Egon Vàsàrhely.

On the fifteenth day from his accident he was restored enough to health for apprehension to cease. He passed some hours seated at an open window in his own room. He never asked if Vàsàrhely were still there or not.

Wanda, who never left him, wondered at that silence, but she forbore to bring forward a name which had had such power to agitate him. She was troubled at the nervousness which still remained to him. The opening of a door, the sound of a step, the entrance of a servant made him start and turn pale. When she spoke of it with anxiety to Herr Joachim, he said vague sentences as to the nervousness which was consequent on great loss of blood, and brought forward instances of soldiers who had lost their nerve from the same cause. It did not satisfy her. She was the descendant of a long line of warriors ; she could not easily believe that her husband's intrepid and careless courage could have been shattered by a flesh wound.

‘Did you really mean,’ he said abruptly to her that afternoon, as he sat for the first time beside the open panes of the oriel; ‘did you really mean that were I to die you would never forget me for any other?’

She rose quickly as if she had been stung, and her face flushed.

‘Do I merit that doubt from you?’ she said. ‘I think not.’

She spoke rather in sadness than in anger. He had hurt her, he could not anger her. He felt the rebuke.

‘Even if I were dead, should I have all your life?’ he murmured, in wonder at that priceless gift.

‘You and your children,’ she said gravely. ‘Ah! what can death do against great love? Make its bands stronger perhaps, its power purer. Nothing else.’

‘I thank you,’ he said very low, with great humility, with intense emotion. For a moment he thought—should he tell her, should he trust this deep tenderness which could brave death, and might brave even shame unblenching? He looked at her from under his drooped eyelids, and then—he dared not. He knew the pride which was in her better than she did—her pride, which was inherited by her first-born, and had been the sign manual of all her imperious race.

He looked at her where she stood with the light falling on her through the amber hues of painted glass; worn, wan, and tired by so many days and nights of anxious vigil, she yet looked a woman whom a nation might salute with the *pro rege nostro!* that Maria Theresa heard. All that a great race possesses and rejoices in of valour, of tradition, of dignity, of high honour, and of blameless truth were expressed in her; every movement, attitude, and gesture spoke of the aristocracy of blood. All that potent and subtle sense of patrician descent which had most allured and intoxicated him in other days now awed and daunted him. He dared not tell her of his treason. He dared not. He was as a false conspirator before a great queen he has betrayed.

‘Are you faint, my love?’ she asked him, alarmed to see the change upon his face and the exhaustion with which he sunk backward against the cushions of his chair.

‘Mere weakness; it will pass,’ he said, smiling as best he might, to reassure her. He felt like a man who slides down a crevasse, and has time and consciousness enough to see the treacherous ice go by him, the black abyss yawning below him, the cold, dark death awaiting him beyond, whilst on the heights the sun is shining.

That night he entreated her to leave him

and rest. He assured her he felt well ; he feigned a need of sleep. For fifteen nights she had not herself lain down. To please him she obeyed, and the deep slumber of tired nature soon fell upon her. When he thought she slept, he rose noiselessly and threw on a long velvet coat, sable-lined, that was by his bedside, and looked at his watch. It was midnight.

He crossed the threshold of the open door into his wife's chamber and stood beside her bed for a moment, gazing at her as she slept. She seemed like the marble statue of some sleeping saint ; she lay in the attitude of S. Cecilia on her bier at Rome. The faint lamplight made her fair skin white as snow. Round her arm was a bracelet of his hair like the one which he wore of hers. He stood and gazed on her, then slowly turned away. Great tears fell down his cheeks as he left her chamber. He opened the door of his own room, the outer one which led into the corridor, and walked down the long tapestry-hung gallery leading to the guest-chambers. It was the first time that he had walked without assistance ; his limbs felt strange and broken, but he held on, leaning now and then to rest against the arras. The whole house was still.

He took his way straight to the apartments set aside for guests. All was dark. The little lamp he carried shed a circle of light about his

steps but none beyond him. When he reached the chamber which he knew was Egon Vàsàrhely's he did not pause. He struck on its panels with a firm hand.

The voice of Vàsàrhely asked from within, 'Who is there? Is there anything wrong?'

'It is I! Open,' answered Sabran.

In a moment more the door unclosed. Vàsàrhely stood within it; he was not undressed. There were a dozen wax candles burning in silver sconces on the table within. The tapestried figures on the walls grew pale and colossal in their light. He did not speak, but waited.

Sabran entered and closed the door behind him. His face was bloodless, but he carried himself erect despite the sense of faintness which assailed him.

'You know who I am?' he said simply, without preface or supplication.

Vàsàrhely gave a gesture of assent.

'How did you know it?'

'I remembered,' answered the other.

There was a moment's silence. If Vàsàrhely could have withered to the earth by a gaze of scorn the man before him, Sabran would have fallen dead. As it was his eyes dropped beneath the look, but the courage and the dignity of his attitude did not alter. He had played

his part of a great noble for so long that it had ceased to be assumption and had become his nature.

‘You will tell her?’ he said, and his voice did not tremble, though his very soul seemed to swoon within him.

‘I shall not tell her!’

Vàsàrhely spoke with effort; his words were hoarse and stern.

‘You will not?’

An immense joy, unlooked for, undreamed of, sprang up in him, checked as it rose by incredulity.

‘But you loved her!’ he said, on an impulse which he regretted even as the exclamation escaped him. Vàsàrhely threw his head back with a gesture of fine anger.

‘If I loved her what is that to you?’ he said, with a restrained violence vibrating in his words. ‘It is, perhaps, because I once loved her that your foul secret is safe with me now. I shall not tell her. I waited to say this to you. I could not write it lest it should meet her eyes. You came to ask me this? Be satisfied and go.’

‘I came to ask you this because, had you said otherwise, I would have shot myself ere she could have heard.’

Vàsàrhely said nothing; a great scorn was

still set like the grimness of death upon his face. He looked far away at the dim figures on the tapestries; he shrunk from the sight of his boyhood's enemy as from some loathly unclean thing he must not kill.

'Suicide!' he thought, 'the Slav's courage, the serf's refuge!'

Before the sight of Sabran the room went round, the lights grew dull, the figures on the walls became fantastic and unreal. His heart beat with painful effort, yet his ears, his throat, his brain seemed full of blood. The nerves of his whole body seemed to shrink and thrill and quiver, but the force of habit kept him composed and erect before this man who was his foe, yet did for him what few friends would have done.

'I do not thank you,' he said at last. 'I understand; you spare me for her sake, not mine.'

'But for her, I would treat you so.'

As he spoke he broke in two a slender agate ruler which lay on the writing-table at his elbow.

'Go,' he added, 'you have had my word; though we live fifty years you are safe from me, because—because—God forgive you! you are hers.'

He made a gesture towards the door.

Sabran shivered under the insult which his conscience could not resent, his hand dared not avenge.

Hearing this there fell away from him the arrogance that had been his mask, the courage that had been his shield. He saw himself for the first time as this man saw him, as all the world would see him if once it knew his secret. For the first time his past offences rose up like ghosts naked from their graves. The calmness, the indifference, the cynicism, the pride which had been so long in his manner and in his nature deserted him. He felt base-born before a noble, a liar before a gentleman, a coward before a man of honour.

Where he stood, leaning on a high caned chair to support himself against the sickly weakness which still came on him from his scarce healed wounds, he felt for the first time to cower and shrink before this man who was his judge, and might become his accuser did he choose. Something in the last words of Egon Vàsàrhely suddenly brought home to him the enormity of his own sin, the immensity of the other's forbearance. He suddenly realised all the offence to honour, all the outrage to pride, all the ineffaceable indignity which he had brought upon a great race : all that he had done, never to be undone by any expiation of

his own, in making Wanda von Szalras the mother of his sons. Submissive, he turned without a word of gesture or of pleading, and felt his way out of the chamber through the dusky mists of the faintness stealing on him.





CHAPTER XX.

HE reached his own room, unseen, feeling his way with his hands against the tapestry of the wall, and had presence of mind enough to fling his clothes off him and stagger to his bed, where he sank down insensible.

She was still asleep.

When dawn broke they found him ill, exhausted, with a return of fever. He had once a fit of weeping like a child. He could not bear his wife a moment from his sight. She reproached herself for having acceded to his desire and left him unattended whilst she slept.

But of that midnight interview she guessed nothing.

Her cousin Egon sent her a few lines, saying

that he had been summoned to represent his monarch at the autumn manœuvres of Prussia, and had left at daybreak without being able to make his farewell in person, as he had previously to go to his castle of Taròc. She attached no importance to it. When Sabran was told of his departure he said nothing. He had recovered his power of self-control: the oriental impassibility under emotion which was in his blood from his Persian mother. If he betrayed himself he knew that it would be of little use to have been spared by his enemy. The depression upon him his wife attributed to his incapacity to move and lead his usual life; a trial always so heavy to a strong man. As little by little his strength returned, he became more like himself. In addressing her he had a gentleness almost timid; and now and then she caught his gaze fastened upon her with a strange appeal.

One day, when he had persuaded her to ride in the forest, and he was certain to be alone for two or three hours, he wrote the following words to his foe and his judge:

‘ Sir,—You will perhaps refuse to read anything written by me. Yet I send you this letter, because I desire to say to you what the physical weakness which was upon me the other night prevented my having time or

strength to explain. I desire also to put in your hands a proof absolute against myself, with which you can do as you please, so that the forbearance which you exercised, if it be your pleasure to continue it, shall not be surprised from you by any momentary generosity, but shall be your deliberate choice and decision. I have another course of action to propose to you, to which I will come later. For the present permit me to give you the outline of all the circumstances which have governed my acts. I am not coward enough to throw the blame on fate or chance; I am well aware that good men and great men combat and govern both. Yet, something of course there lies in these, or, if not, excuse at least explanation. You knew me (when you were a boy) as Vassia Kazán, the natural son of the Prince Pául Ivanovitch Zabarovff. Up to nine years old I dwelt with my grandmother, a Persian woman, on the great plain between the Volga water and the Ural range. Thence I was taken to the Lycée Clovis, a famous college. Prince Zabarovff I never saw but one day in my Volga village, until, when I was fifteen years old, I was sent to his house, Fleur de Roi, near Villerville, where I remained two months, and where you insulted me and I chastised you, and you gave me the wound that I have the mark of to this day. I then

returned to the Lycée, and stayed there two years unnoticed by him. One day I was summoned by the principal, and told abruptly that the Prince Zabaroff was dead—my protector, as they termed him—and that I was penniless, with the world before me. I could not hope to make you understand the passions that raged in me. You, who have always been in the light of fortune, and always the head of a mighty family, could comprehend nothing of the sombre hatreds, the futile revolts, the bitter wrath against heaven and humanity which consumed me then, thus left alone without even the remembrance of a word from my father. I should have returned straightway to the Volga plains, and buried my fevered griefs under their snows, had not I known that my grandmother Maritza, the only living being I had ever loved, had died half a year after I had been taken from her to be sent to the school in Paris. You see, had I been left there I should have been a hunter of wild things or a raftsman on the Volga all my years, and have done no harm. I had a great passion in my childhood for an open-air, free life; my vices, like my artificial tastes, were all learned in Paris. They, and the love of pleasure they created, checked in me that socialistic spirit which is the usual outcome of such a social anomaly as they had made of me.

I might have been a Nihilist but for that and for the instinctive tendency towards aristocratic and absolutist theories which were in my blood. I was a true Russian noble, though a bastard one; and those three months which I had passed at Fleur de Roi had intoxicated me with the thirst for pleasure and enervated me with the longing to be rich and idle. An actress whom I knew intimately also at that time did me much harm. When Paul Zabaroff died he left me nothing, not even a word. It is true that he died suddenly. I quitted the Lycée Clovis with my clothes and my books; I had nothing else in the world. I sold some of these and got to Havre. There I took a passage on a barque going to Mexico with wine. The craft was unseaworthy; she went down with all hands off the Pinos Island, and I, swimming for miles, alone reached the shore. Women there were good to me. I got away in a canoe, and rowed many miles and many days; the sea was calm, and I had bread, fruit, and water enough to last two weeks. At the end of ten days I neared a brig, which took me to Yucatan. My adventurous voyage made me popular there. I gave a false name, of course, for I hated the name of Vassia Kazán. War was going on at the time in Mexico, and I went there and offered myself to the military adven-

turer who was at the moment uppermost. I saw a good deal of guerilla warfare for a year. I liked it : I fear I was cruel. The ruler of the hour, who was scarcely more than a brigand, was defeated and assassinated. At the time of his fall I was at the head of a few troopers far away in the interior. Bands of Indians fell on us in great numbers. I was shot down and left for dead. A stranger found me on the morning after, carried me to his hut, and saved my life by his skill and care. This stranger was the Marquis Xavier de Sabran, who had dwelt for nearly seventy years in the solitude of those virgin forests, which nothing ever disturbed except the hiss of an Indian's arrow or the roar of woods on fire. How he lived there, and why, is all told in the monograph I have published of him. He was a great and a good man. His life, lost under the shadows of those virgin forests, was the life of a saint and of a philosopher in one. His influence upon me was the noblest that I had ever been subject to ; he did me nothing but good. His son had died early, having wedded a Spanish Mexican ere he was twenty. His grandson had died of snake-bite : he had been of my age. At times he almost seemed to think that this lad lived again in me. I spent eight years of my life with him. His profound

studies attracted me; his vast learning awed me. The free life of the woods and sierras, the perilous sports, the dangers from the Indian tribes, the researches into the lost history of the perished nation, all these interested and occupied me. I was glad to forget that I had ever lived another existence. Wholly unlike as it was in climate, in scenery, in custom, the liberty of life on the pampas and in the forests recalled to me my childhood on the steppes of the Volga. I saw no European all those years. The only men I came in contact with were Indians and half breeds; the only woman I loved was an Indian girl; there was not even a Mexican *ranch* near, within hundreds of miles. The dense close-woven forest was between us and the rest of the world; our only highway was a river, made almost inaccessible by dense fields of reeds and banks of jungle and swamps covered with huge lilies. It was a very simple existence, but in it all the wants of nature were satisfied, all healthy desires could be gratified, and it was elevated from brutishness by the lofty studies which I prosecuted under the direction of the Marquis Xavier. Eight whole years passed so. I was twenty-five years old when my protector and friend died of sheer old age in one burning summer, against whose heat he had no strength.

He talked long and tenderly with me ere he died ; told me where to find all his papers, and gave me everything he owned. It was not much. He made me one last request, that I would collect his manuscripts, complete them, and publish them in France. For some weeks after his death I could think of nothing but his loss. I buried him myself, with the aid of an Indian who had loved him ; and his grave is there beside the ruins that he revered, beneath a grove of cypress. I carved a cross in cedar wood, and raised it above the grave. I found all his papers where he had indicated, underneath one of the temple porticoes ; his manuscripts I had already in my possession : all those which had been brought with him from France by his Jesuit tutors, and the certificates of his own and his father's births and marriages, with those of his son, and of his grandson. There was also a paper containing directions how to find other documents, with the orders and patents of nobility of the Sabrans of Romaris, which had been hidden in the oak wood upon their sea-shore in Finisterre. All these he had desired me to seek and take. Now came upon me the temptation to a great sin. The age of his grandson, the young René de Sabran, had been mine : he also had perished from snake-bite, as I said, without

any human being knowing of it save his grandfather and a few natives. It seemed to me that if I assumed his name I should do no one any wrong. It boots not to dwell on the sophisms with which I persuaded myself that I had the right to repair an injustice done to me by human law ere I was born. Men less intelligent than I can always find a million plausible reasons for doing that which they desire to do ; and although the years I had spent beside the Marquis Xavier had purified my character and purged it of much of the vice and the cynicism I had learned in Paris, yet I had little moral conscientiousness. I lived outside the law in many ways, and was indifferent to those measures of right and wrong which too often appeared to me mere puerilities. Do not suppose that I ceased to be grateful to my benefactor ; I adored his memory, but it seemed to me I should do him no wrong whatever. Again and again he had deplored to me that I was not his heir ; he had loved me very truly, and had given me all he held most dear—the fruits of his researches. To be brief, I was sorely tempted, and I gave way to the temptation. I had no difficulty in claiming recognition in the city of Mexico as the Marquis de Sabran. The documents were there, and no creature knew that they were not mine except

a few wild Puebla Indians, who spoke no tongue but their own, and never left their forest solitudes. I was recognised by all the necessary authorities of that country. I returned to France as the Marquis de Sabran. On my voyage I made acquaintance with two Frenchmen of very high station, who proved true friends to me, and had power enough to protect me from the consequences of not having served a military term in France. On my arrival in Europe, I went first to the Bay of Romaris: there I found at once all that had been indicated to me as hidden in the oak wood above the sea. The priest of Romaris, and the peasantry, at the first utterance of the name, welcomed me with rapture; they had forgotten nothing—Bretons never do forget. Vassia Kazán had been numbered with the drowned dead men who had gone down when the *Estelle* had foundered off the Pinos. I had therefore no fear of recognition. I had grown and changed so much during my seven years' absence from Paris that I did not suppose anyone would recognise the Russian collegian in the Marquis de Sabran. And I was not in error. Even you, most probably, would never have known me again had not your perceptions been abnormally quickened by hatred of me as your cousin's

husband; and had you even had suspicions you could never have presumed to formulate them but for that accident in the forest. It is always some such unforeseen trifle which breaks down the wariest schemes. I will not linger on all the causes that made me take the name I did. I can honestly say that had there been any fortune involved, or any even distant heir to be wronged, I should not have done it. As there was nothing save some insignia of knightly orders and some acres of utterly unproductive sea-coast, I wronged no one. What was left of the old manor I purchased with the little money I took over with me. I repeat that I have wronged no one except your cousin, who is my wife. The rest of my life you know. Society in Paris became gracious and cordial to me. You will say that I must have had every moral sense perverted before I could take such a course. But I did not regard it as an immorality. Here was an empty title, like an empty shell, lying ready for any occupant. Its usurpation harmed no one. I intended to justify my assumption of it by a distinguished career, and I was aware that my education had been beyond that of most gentlemen. It is true that when I was fairly launched on a Parisian life pleasure governed me more than ambition; and I found, which had not

before occurred to me, that the aristocratic creeds and the political loyalties which I had perforce adopted with the name of the Sabrans de Romaris completely closed all the portals of political ambition to me. Hence I became almost by necessity a *fainéant*, and fate smiled upon me more than I merited. I discharged my duty to the dead by the publication of all his manuscripts. In this at least I was faithful. Paris applauded me. I became in a manner celebrated. I need not say more, except that I can declare to you the position I had entered upon soon became so natural to me that I absolutely forgot it was assumed. Nature had made me arrogant, contemptuous, courageous; it was quite natural to me to act the part of a great noble. My want of fortune often hampered and irritated me, but I had that instinct in public events which we call *flair*. I made with slender means some audacious and happy ventures on the Bourse. I was also famous for *la main heureuse* in all forms of gambling. I led a selfish and perhaps even a vicious life, but I kept always within those lines which the usages of the world has prescribed to gentlemen even in their licence. I never did anything that degraded the name I had taken, as men of the world read degradation. I should not have satisfied severe moralists, but,

my one crime apart, I was a man of honour until—I loved your cousin. I do not attempt to defend my marriage with her. It was a fraud, a crime; I am well aware of that. If you had struck me the other night, I would not have denied your perfect right to do so. I will say no more. You have loved her. You know what my temptation was: my crime is one you cannot pardon. It is a treason to your rank, to your relatives, to all the traditions of your order. When you were a little lad you said a bitter truth to me. I was born a serf in Russia. There are serfs no more in Russia, but Alexander, who affranchised them, cannot affranchise me. I am base-born. I am like those cross-bred hounds cursed by conflicting elements in their blood: I am an aristocrat in temper and in taste and mind. I am a bastard in class, the chance child of a peasant begotten by a great lord's momentary *ennui* and caprice! But if you will stoop so far—if you will consider me ennobled by *her* enough to meet you as an equal would do—we can find with facility some pretext of quarrel, and under cover and semblance of a duel you can kill me. You will be only taking the just vengeance of a race of which you are the only male champion—what her brothers would surely have taken had they been living. She will mourn for me without

shame, since you have passed me your promise never to tell her of my past. I await your commands. That my little sons will transmit the infamy of my blood to their descendants will be disgrace to them for ever in your sight. Yet you will not utterly hate them, for children are more their mother's than their father's, and she will rear them in all noble ways.'

Then he signed the letter with the name of Vassia Kazán, and addressed it to Egon Vàsàrhely at his castle of Taróc, there to await the return of Vàsàrhely from the Prussian camp. That done, he felt more at peace with himself, more nearly a gentleman, less heavily weighted with his own cowardice and shame.

It was not until three weeks later that he received the reply of Vàsàrhely written from the castle of Taróc. It was very brief:—

'I have read your letter and I have burned it. I cannot kill you, for she would never pardon me. Live on in such peace as you may find.

(Signed) 'PRINCE VÀSÀRHELY.'

To his cousin Vàsàrhely wrote at the same time, and to her said:

'Forgive me that I left you so abruptly.

It was necessary, and I did not rebel against necessity, for so I avoided some pain. The world has seen me at Hohenszalras; let that suffice. Do not ask me to return. It hurts me to refuse you anything, but residence there is only a prolonged suffering to me and must cause irritation to your lord. I go to my soldiers in Central Hungary, amongst whom I make my family. If ever you need me you will know that I am at your service; but I hope this will never be, since it will mean that some evil has befallen you. Rear your sons in the traditions of your race, and teach them to be worthy of yourself: being so they will be also worthy of your name. Adieu, my ever beloved Wanda! Show what I have said herein to your husband, and give me a remembrance in your prayers.

(Signed) 'EGON.'





CHAPTER XXI.

THE Countess Brancka meanwhile had been staying at Taróc for the autumn shooting when her brother-in-law had returned there unexpectedly, and to her chagrin, since she had filled the old castle with friends of her own, such as Egon Vàsàrhely little favoured, and it amused her to play the châtelaine there and organise all manner of extravagant and eccentric pastimes. When he arrived she could no longer enjoy this unchecked independence of folly, and he did not hesitate to make it plain to her that the sooner Taróc should be cleared of its Parisian world the better would he be pleased. Indeed she knew well that it was only his sense of hospitality, as the first duty of a gentleman, which restrained him from enforcing a rough

and sudden exodus upon her guests. He returned, moreover, unusually silent, reserved, and what she termed ill-tempered. It was clear to her that his sojourn at Hohenszalras had been painful to him ; and whenever she spoke to him of it he replied to her in a tone which forbade her further interrogation. If she feared anyone in the world it was Egon, who had again and again paid her debts to spare his brother annoyance, and who received her and her caprices with a contemptuous unalterable disdain.

‘Wanda has ruined him!’ she always thought angrily. ‘He always expects every other woman to have a soul above *chiffons* and to bury herself in the country with children and horses.’

Her quick instincts perceived that the hold upon his thoughts which his cousin always possessed had been only strengthened by his visit to her, and she attributed the gloom which had settled down on him to the pain which the happiness that reigned at Hohenszalras had given him. Little souls always try to cram great ones into their own narrowed measurements. As he did not absolutely dismiss her she continued to entertain her own people at Taróc, ignoring his tacit disapproval, and was still there when the letter of Sabran

reached her brother-in-law. She had very quick eyes ; she was present when the letters, which only came to Taróc once a week, being fetched over many leagues of wild forest, and hill, and torrent, and ravine, were brought to Vàsàrhely, and she noticed that his face changed as he took out a thick envelope, which she, standing by his shoulder, with her hand outstretched for her own correspondence from Paris and Petersburg, could see bore the postmark of Matrey. He threw it amongst a mass of other letters, and soon after took all his papers away with him into the room which was called a library, being full of Hungarian black-letter and monkish literature, gathered in centuries gone by by great priests of the race of Vàsàrhely.

What was in that letter ?

She attended to none of her own, so absorbed was she in the impression which gained upon her that the packet which had brought so much surprise and even emotion upon his face came from the hand of Wanda. ‘ If even she should be no saint at all ? ’ she thought, with a malicious amusement. She did not see Egon Vàsàrhely for many hours, but she did not lose her curiosity nor cease to cast about for a method of gratifying it. At the close of the day when she came back from hunting she

went into the library, which was then empty. She did not seriously expect to see anything that would reward her enterprise, but she knew he read his letters there and wrote the few he was obliged to write : like most soldiers he disliked using pen and ink. It was dusk, and there were a few lights burning in the old silver sconces fixed upon the horns of forest animals against the walls. With a quick, calm touch, she moved all the litter of papers lying on the huge table where he was wont to do such business as he was compelled to transact. She found nothing that gratified her inquisitiveness. She was about to leave the room in baffled impatience—impatience of she knew not what—when her eyes fell upon a pile of charred paper lying on the stove.

It was one of those monumental polychrome stoves of fifteenth-century work in which the country-houses of Central Europe are so rich ; a grand pile of fretted pottery, towering half way to the ceiling, with the crown and arms of the Vàsàrhely princes on its summit. There was no fire in it, for the weather was not cold, and Vàsàrhely, who alone used the room, was an ascetic in such matters ; but upon its jutting step, which was guarded by lions of gilded bronze, there had been some paper burned : the ashes lay there in a little heap. Almost all

of it was ash, but a few torn pieces were only blackened and coloured. With the eager curiosity of a woman who is longing to find another woman at fault, she kneeled down by the stove and patiently examined these pieces. Only one was so little burned that it had a word or two legible upon it ; two of those words were Vassia Kazán. Nothing else was traceable ; she recognised the handwriting of Sabran. She attached no importance to it, yet she slipped the little scrap, burnt and black as it was, within one of her gauntlets ; then, as quickly as she had come there, she retreated, and in another half hour, smiling and radiant, covered with jewels, and with no trace of fatigue or of weather, she descended the great banqueting-hall, clad as though the heart of the Greater Karpathians was the centre of the Boulevard S. Germain.

Who was Vassia Kazán ?

The question floated above all her thoughts all that evening. Who was he, she, or it, and what could Sabran have to say of him, or her, or it to Egon Vàsàrhely ? A less wise woman might have asked straightway what the unknown name might mean, but straight ways are not those which commend themselves to temperaments like hers. The pleasure and the purpose of her life was intrigue. In great

things she deemed it necessity ; in trifles it was an amusement ; without it life was flavourless.

The next day her brother-in-law abandoned Taròc, to join his hussars and prepare for the autumn manœuvres in the plains, and left her and Stefan in possession of the great place, half palace, half fortress, which had withstood more than one siege of Ottoman armies, where it stood across a deep gorge with the water foaming black below. But she kept the charred, torn, triangular scrap of paper ; and she treasured in her memory the two words Vassia Kazán ; and she said again and again and again to herself : ‘Why should he write to Egon ? Why should Egon burn what he writes ?’ Deep down in her mind there was always at work a bitter jealousy of Wanda von Szalras ; jealousy of her regular and perfect beauty, of her vast possessions, of her influence at the Court, of her serene and unspotted repute, and now of her ascendancy over the lives of Sabran and of Vàsàrhely.

‘Why should they both love that woman so much ?’ she thought very often. ‘She is always alike. She has no temptations. She goes over life as if it were frozen snow. She did one senseless thing, but then she was rich enough to do it with impunity. She is so

habitually fortunate that she is utterly uninteresting; and yet they are both her slaves!’

She went home and wrote to a cousin of her own who had been a member of the famous Third Section at Petersburg. She said in her letter: ‘Is there anyone known in Russia as Vassia Kazán? I want you to learn for me to what or to whom this name belongs. It is certainly Russian, and appears to me to have been taken by some one who has been named *more hebræo* from the city of Kazán. You, who know everything past, present, and to come, will be able to know this.’

In a few days she received an answer from Petersburg. Her cousin wrote: ‘I cannot give you the information you desire. It must be a thing of the past. But I will keep it in mind, and sooner or later you shall have the knowledge you wish. You will do us the justice to admit that we are not easily baffled.’

She was not satisfied, but knew how to be patient.





CHAPTER XXII.

STRANGELY enough the consciousness that one person lived who knew his secret unnerved him. He had said truly that so much were all his instincts and temper those of an aristocrat that he had long ceased to remember that he was not the true Marquis de Sabran. The admiration men frankly gave him, and the ascendancy he exercised over women, had alike concurred in fostering his self-delusion. Since his recognition by the foe of his boyhood a vivid sense of his own shamefulness, however, had come upon him; a morbid consciousness that he was not what he seemed, and what all the world believed him, had returned to him. Egon would never speak, but he himself could never forget. He said to himself in his solitude, 'I

am Vassia Kazán!’ and what he had done appeared to him intolerable, infamous, beyond all expiation.

It was like an impalpable but impassable wall built up between himself and her. Nothing was changed except that one man knew his secret, but this one fact seemed to change the face of the world. For the first time all the deference, all the homage with which the people of the Tauern treated him seemed to him a derision. Naturally of proud temper, and of an intellect which gave him ascendancy over others, he had from the first moment he had assumed the marquisate of Sabran received all the acknowledgments of his rank with an honest unconsciousness of imposture. After all he had in his veins blood as patrician as that of the Sabrans; but now that Egon Väsàrhely knew the truth he was perpetually conscious of not being what he seemed. The mere sense that about the world there was another living being who knew what he knew, shook down all the self-possession and philosophy which had so long made him assure himself that the assumption of a name was an immaterial circumstance, which, harming no one, could concern no one. Egon Väsàrhely seemed to have seized his sophisms in a rude grasp, and shaken them down as blossoms fall in wind. He thought with bitter

self-contempt how true the cynic was who said that no sin exists so long as it is not found out ; that discovery is the sole form which remorse takes.

At times his remorse made him almost afraid of Wanda, almost shrink from her, almost tremble at her regard ; at other times it intensified his passion and infused into his embraces a kind of ferocity of triumph. He would show an almost brutal ardour in his caresses, and would think with an almost cruel exultation, 'I was born a serf, and I am her lover, her lord !' Strangely enough, she began to lose something of her high influence upon him, of her spiritual superiority in his sight. She was so entirely, so perpetually his, that she became in a manner tainted with his own degradation. She could no longer check him with a word, calm him with a gesture of restraint. She was conscious of a change in him which she could not explain to herself. His sweetness of temper was broken by occasional irritability that she had never seen before. He was at times melancholy and absorbed ; he at times displayed a jealousy which appeared unworthy of herself and him ; at other moments he adored her, submitted to her with too great a humility. They were still happy, but their happiness was more uncertain, more disturbed

by passing shadows. She told herself that it was always so in marriage, that in the old trite phrase nothing mortal was ever perfect long. But this philosophy failed to reconcile her. She found herself continually pondering on the alteration that she perceived in him, without being able to explain it to herself in any satisfactory manner.

One day he announced to her without preface that he had decided to renounce the name of Sabran ; that he preferred to any other the title which she had given him in the Countship of Idrac. She was astonished, but on reflection only saw, in his choice, devotion and deference to herself. Perhaps, too, she reflected with a pang, he desired some foreign mission such as she had once proposed to him ; perhaps the life at Hohenszalras was monotonous and too quiet for a man so long used to the movement and excitation of Paris. She suggested the invitation of a circle of guests more often, but he rejected the idea with some impatience. He, who had previously amused himself so well with the part of host to a brilliant society, now professed that he saw nothing but trouble and *ennui* in a house full of people who changed every week, and of royal personages who exacted ceremonious observances that were tedious and burdensome. So they

remained alone, for even the Princess Ottilie had gone away to Lilienslust. For her own part she asked nothing better. Her people, her lands, her occupations, her responsibilities, were always interest enough. She loved the stately, serene tread of Time in these mountain solitudes. Life always seemed to her a purer, graver, more august thing when no echo of the world without jarred on the solemnity of the woods and hills. She wanted her children to grow up to love Hohenzalras, as she had always done, far above all pomps and pleasures of courts and cities.

The winter went by, and he spent most of the days out of doors in violent exercise, sledging, skating, wolf hunting. In the evenings he made music for her in the white room : beautiful, dreamy music, that carried her soul from earth. He played for hours and hours far into the night ; he seemed more willing to do anything than to converse. When he talked to her she was sensible of an effort of constraint ; it was no longer the careless, happy, spontaneous conversation of a man certain of receiving sympathy in all his opinions, indulgence in all his errors, comprehension in even his vaguest or most eccentric ideas : a certain charm was gone out of their intercourse. She thought sometimes humbly enough, was it be-

cause a man always wearies of a woman? Yet she could scarcely think that, for his reverential deference to her alternated with a passion that had lost nothing of its voluptuous intensity.

So the winter passed away. Madame Ottilie was in the South for her health, with her relatives of Lilienhöhe; they invited no one, and so no one could approach them. The children grew and thrived. Bela and his brother had a little sledge of their own, drawn by two Spanish donkeys, white as the snows that wrapped the Iselthal in their serenity and silence. In their little sable coats and their sable-lined hoods the two little boys looked like rosebuds wrapped in brown moss. They were a pretty spectacle upon the ice, with their stately Heiduck, wrapped in his scarlet and black cloak, walking by the gilded shell-shaped sledge.

‘Bela loves the ice best. Bela wishes the summer never was!’ said the little heir of the Counts of Szalras one day, as he leaped out from under the bearskin of his snow-carriage. His father heard him, and smiled a little bitterly.

‘You have the snow in your blood,’ he thought. ‘I, too, know how I loved the winter with all its privations, how I skimmed like a swallow down the frozen Volga, how I breasted the wind of the North Sea, sad with the dying cries of the swans!’

But I had an empty stomach and naked limbs under my rough goatskin, and you ride there in your sables and velvets, a proud little prince, and yet you are my son !’

Was he almost angered against his own child for the great heirship to which he was born, as kings are often of their dauphins? Bela looked up at him a little timidly, always being in a certain awe of his father.

‘ May Bela go with you some day with the big black horses, one day when you go very far ? ’

‘ Ask your mother,’ said Sabran.

‘ She will like it,’ said the child. ‘ Yesterday she said you never do think of Bela. She did not say it *to* Bela, but he heard.’

‘ I will think of him,’ said Sabran, with some emotion : he had a certain antagonism to the child, of which he was vaguely ashamed ; he was sorry that she should have noticed it. He disliked him because Bela so visibly resembled himself that he was a perpetual reproach ; a living sign of how the blood of a Russian lord and of a Persian peasant had been infused into the blood of the Austrian nobles.

The next day he took the child with him on a drive of many leagues, through the frozen highways winding through the frosted forests under the huge snow-covered range

of the Glöckner mountains. Bela was in raptures; the grand black Russian horses, whose speed was as the wind, were much more to his taste than the sedate and solemn Spanish asses. When they returned, and Sabran lifted him out of the sledge in the twilight, the child kissed his hand.

‘Bela loves you,’ he said timidly.

‘Why do you?’ said his father, surprised and touched. ‘Because you are your mother’s child?’

Bela did not understand. He said, after a moment of reflection :

‘Bela is afraid, when you are angry; very afraid. But Bela does love you.’

Sabran laid his hand on the child’s shoulder. ‘I shall never be angry if Bela obey his mother, and never pain her. Remember that.’

‘He will remember,’ said Bela. ‘And may he go with the big black horses very soon again?’

‘Your mother’s horses are just as big, and just as black. Is it not the same thing to go with her?’

‘No. Because she takes Bela often; you never.’

‘You are ungrateful,’ said Sabran, in the tone which always alarmed and awed the bold, bright spirit of his child. ‘Your mother’s love

beside mine is like the great mountain beside the speck of dust. Can you understand? You will when you are a man. Obey her and adore her. So you will best please me.'

Bela looked at him with troubled suffused eyes; he went within doors a little sadly, led away by Hubert, and when he reached his nursery and had his furs taken from off him he was still serious, and for once he did not tell his thoughts to Gela, for they were too many for him to be able to master them in words. His father was a beautiful, august, terrible, magnificent figure in his eyes; with the confused fancies of a child's scarce-opened mind he blended together in his admiration Sabran and the great marble form of S. Johann of Prague which stretched its arm towards the lake from the doors of the great entrance, and, as Bela always understood, controlled the waters and the storms at will. Bela feared no one else in all the world, but he feared his father, and for that reason loved him as he loved nothing else in his somewhat selfish and imperious little life.

'It is so good of you to have given Bela that pleasure,' his wife said to him when he entered the white room. 'I know you cannot care to hear a child chatter as I do. It can only be tiresome to you.'

‘I will drive him every day if it please *you*,’ said Sabran.

‘No, no ; that would be too much to exact from you. Besides, he would soon despise his donkeys, and desert poor Gela. I take him but seldom myself for that reason. He has an idea that he is immeasurably older than Gela. It is true a year at their ages is more difference than are ten years at ours.’

‘The child said something to me, as if he had heard you say I do not care for him?’

‘You do not, very much. Surely you are inclined to be harsh to him?’

‘If I be so, it is only because I see so much of myself in him.’

He looked at her, assailed once more by the longing which at times came over him to tell her the truth of himself, to risk everything rather than deceive her longer, to throw himself upon her mercy, and cut short this life which had so much of duplicity, so much of concealment, that every year added to it was a stone added to the mountain of his sins. But when he looked at her he dared not. The very grace and serenity of her daunted him ; all the signs of nobility in her, from the repose of her manner to the very beauty of her hands, with their great rings gleaming on the long and slender fingers, seemed to awe him into silence.

She was so proud a woman, so great a lady, so patrician in all her prejudices, her habits, her hereditary qualities, he dared not tell her that he had betrayed her thus. An infidelity, a folly, even any other crime he thought he could have summoned courage to confess to her; but to say to her, the daughter of a line of princes: 'I, who have made you the mother of my children, I was born a bastard and a serf!' How could he dare say that? Anything else she might forgive, he thought, since love is great, but never that. Nay, a cold sickness stole over him as he thought again that she came of great lords who had meted justice out over whole provinces for a thousand years; and he had wronged her so deeply that the human tongue scarcely held any word of infamy enough to name his crime. The law would set her free, if she chose, from a man who had so betrayed her, and his children would be bastards like himself.

He had stretched himself on a great couch covered with white bear-skins. He was in shadow; she was in the light that came from the fire on the wide hearth, and from the oriel window near, a red warm dusky light, that fell on the jewels on her hands, the furs on her skirts, the very pearls about her throat.

She glanced at him anxiously, seeing how

motionless he lay there, with his head turned backward on the cushions.

‘I am afraid you are weak still from that wound,’ she said, as she rose and approached him. ‘Greswold assures me it has left no trace, but I am always afraid. And you look often so pale. Perhaps you exert yourself too much? Let the wolves be. Perhaps it is too cold for you? Would you like to go to the south? Do not think of me; my only happiness is to do whatever you wish.’

He kissed her hand with deep unfeigned emotion. ‘I believe in angels since I knew you,’ he murmured. ‘No; I will not take you away from the winter and the people that you love. I am well enough. Greswold is right. I could not master those horses if I were not strong; be sure of that.’

‘But I always fear that it is dull here for you?’

‘Dull! with you? “Custom cannot stale her infinite variety.” That was written in prophecy of your charm for me.’

‘You will always flatter me! And I am not “various” at all; I am too grave to be entertaining. I am just the German house-mother who cares for the children and for you.’

He laughed.

‘Is that your portrait of yourself? I think

Carolus Duran's is truer, my grand châtelaine. When you are at Court the whole circle seems to fade to nothing before your presence. Though there are so many women high-born and beautiful there, you eclipse them all.'

'Only in your eyes! And you know I care nothing for courts. What I like is the life here, where one quiet day is the pattern of all the other days. If I were sure that you were content in it——'

'Why should you think of that?'

'My love, tell me honestly, do you never miss the world?'

He rose and walked to the hearth. He, whose life was a long lie, never lied to her if he could avoid it; and he knew very well that he did miss the world with all its folly, stimulant, and sin. Sometimes the moral air here seemed to him too pure, too clear.

'Did I do so I should be thankless indeed—thankless as madmen are who do not know the good done to them. I am like a ship that has anchored in a fair haven after press of weather. I infinitely prefer to see none but yourself: when others are here we are of necessity so much apart. If the weather,' he added more lightly, 'did not so very often wear Milton's grey sandals, there would be nothing one could ever wish changed in the life here. For such

great riders as we are, that is a matter of regret. Wet saddles are too often our fate, but in compensation our forests are so green.'

She did not press the question.

But the next day she wrote a letter to a relative who was a great minister and had preponderating influence in the council chamber of the Austrian Empire. She did not speak to Sabran of the letter that she sent.

She had not known any of that disillusion which befalls most women in their love. Her husband had remained her lover, passionately, ardently, jealously; and the sincerity of his devotion to her had spared her all that terrible consciousness of the man's satiety which usually confronts a woman in the earliest years of union. She shrank now with horror from the fear which came to her that this passion might, like so many others, alter and fade under the dulness of habit. She had high courage and clear vision; she met half-way the evil that she dreaded.

In the spring a Foreign Office despatch from Vienna came to him and surprised and moved him strongly. With it in his hand he sought her at once.

'You did this!' he said quickly. 'They offer me the Russian mission.'

She grew a little pale, but had courage to

smile. She had seen by a glance at his face the pleasure the offer gave him.

‘I only told my cousin Kunst that I thought you might be persuaded to try public life, if he proposed it to you.’

‘When did you say that?’

‘One day in the winter, when I asked you if you did not miss the world.’

‘I never thought I betrayed that I did so.’

‘You were only over eager to deny it. And I know your generosity, my love. You miss the world; we will go back to it for a little. It will only make our life here dearer—I hope.’

He was silent; emotion mastered him. ‘You have the most unselfish nature that was!’ he said brokenly. ‘It will be a cruel sacrifice to you, and yet you urge it for my sake.’

‘Dear, will you not understand? What is for your sake is what is most for mine. I see you long, despite yourself, to be amidst men once more, and use your rare talents as you cannot use them here. It is only right that you should have the power to do so. If our life here has taken the hold on your heart then, I think you will come back to it all the more gladly. And then I too have my vanity; I shall be proud for the world to see how you can fill a great station, conduct a difficult negotiation, distinguish yourself in every way.

When they praise you, I shall be repaid a thousand times for any sacrifice of my own tastes that there may be.'

He heard her with many conflicting emotions, of which a passionate gratitude was the first and highest.

'You make me ashamed,' he said in a low voice. 'No man can be worthy of such goodness as yours ; and I——'

Once more the avowal of the truth rose to his lips, but stayed unuttered. His want of courage took refuge in procrastination.

'We need not decide for a day or two,' he added ; 'they give me time ; we will think well. When do you think I must reply ?'

'Surely soon ; your delay would seem disrespect. You know we Austrians are very ceremonious.'

'And if I accept, it will not make you unhappy ?'

'My love, no, a thousand times, no ; your choice is always mine.'

He stooped and kissed her hand.

'You are ever the same,' he murmured. 'The noblest, the most generous——'

She smiled bravely. 'I am quite sure you have decided already. Go to my table yonder, and write a graceful acceptance to my cousin Kunst. You will be happier when it is posted.'

‘No, I will think a little. It is not a thing to be done in haste. It will be irrevocable.’

‘Irrevocable? A diplomatic mission? You can throw it up when you please. You are not bound to serve longer than you choose.’

He was silent: what he had thought himself had been of the irrevocable insult he would be held to have offered to the emperor, the nation, and the world, if ever they knew.

‘It will not be liked if I accept for a mere caprice. One must never treat a State as Bela treats his playthings,’ he said as he rang, and when the servant answered the summons ordered them to saddle his horse.

‘No; there is no haste. Glearemborg is not definitely recalled, I think.’

But as she spoke she knew very well that, unknown to himself, he had already decided; that the joy and triumph the offer had brought to him were both too great for him eventually to resist them. He sat down and re-read the letter.

She had said the truth to him, but she had not said all the truth. She had a certain desire that he should justify her marriage in the eyes of the world by some political career brilliantly followed; but this was not her chief motive in wishing him to return to the life of cities. She had seen that he was in a manner disquieted,

discontented, and attributed it to discontent at the even routine of their lives. The change in his moods and tempers, the arbitrary violence of his love for her, vaguely alarmed and troubled her; she seemed to see the germ of much that might render their lives far less happy. She realised that she had given herself to one who had the capacity of becoming a tyrannical possessor, and retained, even after six years of marriage, the irritable ardour of a lover. She knew that it was better for them both that the distraction and the restraint of the life of the world should occupy some of his thoughts, and check the over-indulgence of a passion which in solitude grew feverish and morbid. She had not the secret of the change in him, of which the result alone was apparent to her, and she could only act according to her light. If he grew morose, tyrannical, violent, all the joy of their life would be gone. She knew that men alter curiously under the sense of possession. She felt that her influence, though strong, was not paramount as it had been, and she perceived that he no longer took much interest in the administration of the estates, in which he had shown great ability in the first years of their marriage. She had been forced to resume her old governance of all those matters, and she knew that it was not good for

him to live without occupation. She feared that the sameness of the days, to her so delightful, to him grew tiresome. To ride constantly, to hunt sometimes, to make music in the evenings—this was scarcely enough to fill up the life of a man who had been a *viveur* on the bitumen of the boulevards for so long.

A woman of a lesser nature would have been too vain to doubt the all-sufficiency of her own presence to enthrall and to content him; but she was without vanity, and had more wisdom than most women. It did not even once occur to her, as it would have done incessantly to most, that the magnificence of all her gifts to him were title-deeds to his content for life.

Public life would be her enemy, would take her from the solitudes she loved, would change her plans for her children's education, would bring the world continually betwixt herself and her husband; but since he wished it that was all she thought of, all her law.

‘Surely he will accept?’ said Mdme. Otilie, who had returned from the south of France.

‘Yes, he will accept,’ said his wife. ‘He does not know it, but he will.’

‘I cannot imagine why he should affect to

hesitate. It is the career he is made for, with his talents, his social graces.'

'He does not affect; he hesitates for my sake. He knows I am never happy away from Hohenszalras.'

'Why did you write then to Kunst?'

'Because it will be better for him; he is neither a poet nor a philosopher, to be able to live away from the world.'

'Which are you?'

'Neither; only a woman who loves the home she was born in, and the people she——'

'Reigns over,' added the Princess. 'Admit, my beloved, that a part of your passion for Hohenszalras comes of the fact that you cannot be quite as omnipotent in the world as you are here!'

Wanda von Szalras smiled. 'Perhaps; the best motive is always mixed with a baser. But I adore the country and country life. I abhor cities.'

'Men are always like Horace,' said the Princess. 'They admire rural life, but they remain for all that with Augustus.'

At that moment they heard the hoofs of his horse galloping up the great avenue. A quarter of an hour went by, for he changed his dress before coming into his wife's presence. He would no more have gone to her with the

dust or the mud of the roads upon him than he would have gone in such disarray into the inner circle of the Kaiserin.

When he entered, she did not speak, but the Princess Ottilie said with vivacity :

‘ Well ! you accept, of course ? ’

‘ I will neither accept nor decline. I will do what Wanda wishes.’

The Princess gave an impatient movement of her little foot on the carpet.

‘ Wanda is a hermit,’ she said ; ‘ she should have dwelt in a cave, and lived on berries with S. Scholastica. What is the use of leaving it to her ? She will say No. She loves her mountains.’

‘ Then she shall stay amidst her mountains.’

‘ And you will throw all your future away ? ’

‘ Dear mother, I have no future—should have had none but for her.’

‘ All that is very pretty, but after nearly six years of marriage it is not necessary to *faire des madrigaux*.’

The Princess sat a little more erect, angrily, and continued to tap her foot upon the floor. His wife was silent for a little while ; then she went over to her writing-table, and wrote with a firm hand a few lines in German. She rose and gave the sheet to Sabran.

‘Copy that,’ she said, ‘or give it as many graces of style as you like.’

His heart beat, his sight seemed dim as he read what she had written.

It was an acceptance.

‘See, my dear René!’ said the Princess, when she understood; ‘never combat a woman on her own ground and with her own weapon—unselfishness! The man must always lose in a conflict of that sort.’

The tears stood in his eyes as he answered her—

‘Ah, madame! if I say what I think, you will accuse me again of *faisant des madrigaux*!’





CHAPTER XXIII.

A WEEK or two later Sabran arrived alone at their palace in Vienna, and was cordially received by the great minister whom Wanda called her cousin Kunst. He had also an audience of his Imperial master, who showed him great kindness and esteem; he had been always popular and welcome at the Hofburg. His new career awaited him under auspices the most engaging; his intelligence, which was great, took pleasure at the prospect of the field awaiting it; and his personal pride was gratified and flattered at the personal success which he enjoyed. He was aware that the brain he was gifted with would amply sustain all the demands for *finesse* and penetration that a high diplomatic mission would make upon it, and he knew that the immense fortune he commanded through his

wife would enable him to fill his place with the social brilliancy and splendour it required.

He felt happier than he had done ever since the day in the forest when the name of Vassia Kazán had been said in his ear; he had recovered his nerve, his self-command, his *insouciance*; he was once more capable of honestly forgetting that he was anything besides the great gentleman he appeared. There was an additional pungency for him in the fact of his mission being to Russia. He hated the country as a renegade hates a religion he has abandoned. The undying hereditary enmity which must always exist, *sub rosa*, betwixt Austria and Russia was in accordance with the antagonism he himself felt for every rood of the soil, for every syllable of the tongue, of the Muscovite. He knew that Paul Zabaroff, his father's legitimate son, was a mighty prince, a keen politician, a favourite courtier at the Court of St. Petersburg. The prospect of himself appearing at that Court as the representative of a great nation, with the occasion and the power to meet Paul Zabaroff as an equal, and defeat his most cherished intrigues, his most subtle projects, gave an intensity to his triumph such as no mere social honours or gratified ambition could alone have given him. If the minister had searched the whole of the Austrian empire

through, in all the ranks of men he could have found no one so eager to serve the purpose and the interests of his Imperial master against the rivalry of Russia, as he found in one who had been born a naked *moujik* in the *isba* of a Persian peasant.

Even though this distinction which was offered him would rest like all else on a false basis, yet it intoxicated him, and would gratify his desires to be something above and beyond the mere prince-consort that he was. He knew that his talents were real, that his tact and perception were unerring, that his power to analyse and influence men was great. All these qualities he felt would enable him in a public career to conquer admiration and eminence. He was not yet old enough to be content to regard the future as a thing belonging to his sons, nor had he enough philo-progenitiveness ever to do so at any age.

‘To return so to Russia!’ he thought with rapture. All the ambition that had been in him in his college days at the Lycée Clovis, which had never taken definite shape, partly from indolence and partly from circumstance, and had not been satisfied even by the brilliancy of his marriage, was often awakened and spurred by the greatness of the social position of all those with whom he associated. In his

better moments he sometimes thought, 'I am only the husband of the Countess von Szalras ; I am only the father of the future lords of Hohenzalras ;' and the reflection that the world might regard him so made him restless and ill at ease.

He knew that, being what he was, he would add to his crime tenfold by acceptance of the honour offered to him. He knew that the more prominent he was in the sight of men, the deeper would be his fall if ever the truth were told. What gauge had he that some old school-mate, dowered with as long a memory as Väsàrhely's, might not confront him with the same charge and challenge? True, this danger had always seemed to him so remote that never since he had landed at Romaris bay had he been troubled by any apprehension of it. His own assured position, his own hauteur of bearing, his own perfect presence of mind, would have always enabled him to brave safely such an ordeal under the suspicion of any other than Väsàrhely ; with any other he could have relied on his own coolness and courage to have borne him with immunity through any such recognition. Besides, he had always reckoned, and reckoned justly, that no one would ever dare to insult the Marquis de Sabran with a suspicion that could have no proof to sustain it.

So he had always reasoned, and events had justified his expectations and deductions.

This month that he now passed in Vienna was the proudest of his life; not perhaps the happiest, for beneath his contentment there was a jarring remembrance that he was deceiving a great sovereign and his ministers. But he thrust this sting of conscience aside whenever it touched him, and abandoned himself with almost youthful gladness to the felicitations he received, the arrangements he had to make, and the contemplation of the future before him. The pleasures of the gay and witty city surrounded him, and he was too handsome, too seductive, and too popular not to be sought by women of all ranks, who rallied him on his long devotion to his wife, and did their best to make him ashamed of constancy.

‘What beasts we are!’ he thought, as he left Daum’s at the flush of dawn, after a supper there which he had given, and which had nearly degenerated into an orgie. ‘Yet is it unfaithfulness to her? My soul is always hers and my love.’

Still his conscience smote him, and he felt ashamed as he thought of her proud frank eyes, of her noble trust in him, of her pure and lofty life led there under the snow summits of her hills.

He worshipped her, with all his life he wor-

shipped her ; a moment's caprice, a mere fume and fever of senses surprised and astray, were not infidelity to her. So he told himself, with such sophisms as men most use when most they are at fault, as he walked home in the rose of the daybreak to her great palace, which like all else of hers was his.

As he ascended the grand staircase, with the escutcheon of the Szalras repeated on the gilded bronze of its balustrade, a chill and a depression stole upon him. He loved her with intensity and ardour and truth, yet he had been disloyal to her ; he had forgotten her, he had been unworthy of her. What worth were all the women in the world beside her ? What did they seem to him now, those Delilahs who had beguiled him ? He loathed the memory of them ; he wondered at himself. He went through the great house slowly towards his own rooms, pausing now and then, as though he had never seen them before, to glance at some portrait, some stand of arms, some banner commemorative of battle, some quiver, bow, and pussikan taken from the Turk.

On his table he found a telegram sent from Lienz :

‘ I am so glad you are amused and happy. We are all well here.

(Signed) ‘ WANDA.’

No torrents of rebuke, no scenes of rage, no passion of reproaches could have carried reproach to him like those simple words of trustful affection.

‘An angel of God should have descended to be worthy her!’ he thought.

The next evening there was a ball at the Hof. It was later in the season than such things were usually, but the visit to the court of the sovereign of a neighbouring nation had detained their majesties and the nobility in Vienna. The ball was accompanied by all that pomp and magnificence which characterise such festivities, and Sabran, present at it, was the object of universal congratulation and much observation, as the ambassador-designate to Russia.

Court dress became him, and his great height and elegance of manner made him noticeable even in that brilliant crowd of notables. All the greatest ladies distinguished him with their smiles, but he gave them no more than courtesy. He saw only before the ‘eye of memory’ his wife as he had seen her at the last court ball, with the famous pearls about her throat, and her train of silver tissue sown with pearls and looped up with white lilac.

‘It is the flower I like best,’ she had said to him. ‘It brought me your first love-message

in Paris, do you remember? It said little; it was very discreet, but it said enough!’

‘You are always thinking of Wanda!’ said the Countess Brancka to him now, with a tinge of impatience in her tone.

He coloured a little, and said with that hauteur with which he always repressed any passing jest at his love for his wife:

‘When both one’s duty and joy point the same way it is easy to follow them in thought.’

‘I hope you follow them in action too,’ said Mdme. Brancka.

‘If I do not, I am at least only responsible to Wanda.’

‘Who would be a lenient judge you mean?’ said the Countess, with a certain smile that displeased him. ‘Do not be too sure; she is a von Szalras. They are not agreeable persons when they are angered.’

‘I have not been so unhappy as to see her so,’ said Sabran coldly, with a vague sense of uneasiness. As much as it is possible for a man to dislike a woman who is very lovely, and young enough to be still charming in the eyes of the world, he disliked Olga Brancka. He had known her for many years in Paris, not intimately, but by force of being in the same society, and, like many men who do not lead

very decent lives themselves, he frankly detested *cocodettes*.

‘If we want these manners we have our *lionnes*,’ he was wont to say, at a time when Cochonette was seen every day behind his horses by the Cascade, and it had been the height of the Countess Olga’s ambition at that time to be called like Cochonette. A certain resemblance there was between the great lady and the wicked one; they had the same small delicate sarcastic features, the same red gold curls, the same perfect colourless complexion; but where Cochonette had eyes of the lightest blue, the wife of Count Stefan had the luminous piercing black eyes of the Muscovite physiognomy. Still the likeness was there, and it made the sight of Mdme. Brancka distasteful to him, since his memories of the other were far from welcome. It was for Cochonette that he had broken the bank at Monte Carlo, and into her lap that he had thrown all the gold rouleaux at a time when in his soul he had already adored Wanda von Szalras, and had despised himself for returning to the slough of his old pleasures. It was Cochonette who had sold his secrets to the Prussians, and brought them down upon him in the farmhouse amongst the orchards of the Orléannais, whilst she passed safely through the German lines and across the frontier, laden with

her jewels and her *valeurs* of all kinds, saying in her teeth as she went: 'He will never see that Austrian woman again!' That had been the end of all he had known of Cochonette, and a presentiment of perfidy, of danger, of animosity always came over him whenever he saw the *joli petit minois* which in profile was so like Cochonette's, looking up from under the loose auburn curls that Mdme. Olga had copied from her.

Olga Brancka now looked at him with some malice and with more admiration; she was very pretty that night, blazing with diamonds, and with her beautifully shaped person as bare as Court etiquette would permit. In her red gold curls she had some butterflies in jewels flashing all the colours of the rainbow and glowing like sunbeams. There was such a butterfly, big as the great Emperor moth, between her breasts, making their whiteness look like snow.

Instinctively Sabran glanced away from her. He felt an *étourdissement* that irritated him. The movement did not escape her. She took his arm.

'We will move about a little while,' she said. 'Let us talk of Wanda, *mon beau cousin*, since you can think of no one else. And so you are really going to Russia?'

‘I believe so.’

‘It will be a great sacrifice to her; any other woman would be in paradise in St. Petersburg, but she will be wretched.’

‘I hope not; if I thought so I would not go.’

‘You cannot but go now; you have made your choice. You will be happy enough. You will play again enormously, and Wanda has so much money that if you lose millions it will not ruin her.’

‘I shall certainly not play with my wife’s money. I have never played since my marriage.’

‘For all that you will play in St. Petersburg. It is in the air. A saint could not help doing it, and you are not a saint by nature, though you have become one since marriage. But you know conversions by marriage do not last. They are like compulsory confessions. They mean nothing.’

‘You are very malicious to-night, madame,’ said Sabran, absently; he was in no mood for banter, and was disinclined to take up her challenge.

‘Call me at least *cousinette*,’ said Mdme. Olga; ‘we are cousins, you know, thanks to Wanda. Oh! she will be very unhappy in St. Petersburg; she will not amuse herself, she never does. She

is incapable of a flirtation ; she never touches a card. When she dances it is only because she must, and then it is only a quadrille or a contre-dance. She always reminds me of Marie Thérèse's "In our position nothing is a trifle." You remember the Empress's letters to Versailles ?'

Sabran was very much angered, but he was afraid to express his anger lest it should seem to make him absurd.

'Madame,' he said, with ill-repressed irritation, 'I know you speak only in jest, but I must take the liberty to tell you—however bourgeois it appear—that I do not allow a jest even from you upon my wife. Anything she does is perfect in my sight, and if she be imbued with the old traditions of gentle blood, too many ladies desert them in these days for me not to be grateful to her for her loyalty.'

She listened, with her bright black eyes fixed on him ; then she leaned a little more closely on his arm.

'Do you know that you said that very well? Most men are ridiculous when they are in love with their wives, but it becomes you. Wanda is perfect, we all know that ; you are not alone in thinking so. Ask Egon !'

The face of Sabran changed as he heard

that name. As she saw the change she thought: 'Can it be possible that he is jealous?'

Aloud she said with a little laugh: 'I almost wonder Egon did not run you through the heart before you married. Now, of course, he is reconciled to the inevitable; or, if not reconciled, he has to submit to it as we all have to do. He grows very *farouche*; he lives between his troopers and his castle of Taróc, like a barbaric lord of the Middle Ages. Were you ever at Taróc? It is worth seeing—a huge fortress, old as the days of Ottokar, in the very heart of the Karpathians. He leads a wild, fierce life enough there. If he keep the memory of Wanda with him it is as some men keep an idolatry for what is dead.'

Sabran listened with a sombre irritation. 'Suppose we leave my wife's name in peace,' he said coldly. 'The *grosser cotillon* is about to begin; may I aspire to the honour?'

As he led her out, and the light fell on her red gold curls, on her dazzling butterflies, her armour of diamonds, her snow-white skin, a thousand memories of Cochonette came over him, though the scene around him was the ball-room of the Hofburg, and the woman whose great bouquet of *réve d'or* roses touched his hand was a great lady who had been the wife of Gela von Szalras, and the daughter of the

Prince Serriatine. He distrusted her, he despised her, he disliked her so strongly that he was almost ashamed of his own antagonism ; and yet her contact, her grace of movement, the mere scent of the bouquet of roses had a sort of painful and unwilling intoxication for the moment for him.

He was glad when the long and gorgeous figures of the cotillon had tired out even her steel-like nerves, and he was free to leave the palace and go home to sleep. He looked at a miniature of his wife as he undressed ; the face of it, with its tenderness and its nobility, seemed to him, after the face of this other woman, like the pure high air of the Iselthal after the heated and unhealthy atmosphere of a gambling-room.

The next day there was a review of troops in the Prater. His presence was especially desired ; he rode his favourite horse Siegfried, which had been brought up from the Tauern for the occasion. The weather was brilliant, the spectacle was grand ; his spirits rose, his natural gaiety of temper returned. He was addressed repeatedly by the sovereigns present. Other men spoke of him, some with admiration, some with envy, as one who would become a power at the court and in the empire.

As he rode homeward, when the manœuvres

were over, making his way slowly through the merry crowds of the good-humoured populace, through the streets thronged with glittering troops and hung with banners, and odorous with flowers, he thought to himself with a light heart: 'After all, I may do her some honour before I die.'

When he reached home and his horse was led away, a servant approached him with a sealed letter lying on a gold salver. A courier, who said that he had travelled with it without stopping from Taróc, had brought it from the Most High the Prince Vàsàrhely.

Sabran's heart stood still as he took the letter and passed up the staircase to his own apartments. Once there he ordered his servants away, locked the doors, and, then only, broke the seal.

There were two lines written on the sheet inside. They said :

'I forbid you to serve my Sovereign. If you persist, I must relate to him, under secrecy, what I know.'

They were fully signed—'Egon Vàsàrhely.' They had been sent by a courier, to insure delivery and avoid the publicity of the telegraph. They had been written as soon as the tidings of his appointment to the Russian mission had become known at the mountain fortress of Taróc.



CHAPTER XXIV.

AS the carriage of the Countess Olga rolled home through the Graben after the military spectacle, she stopped it suddenly, and signed to an old man in the crowd who was waiting to cross the road until a regiment of cuirassiers had rolled by. He was eyeing them critically, as only an old soldier does look at troops.

‘Is it you, Georg?’ said Madame Olga. ‘What brings you here?’

‘I came from Taróc with a letter from the Prince, my master,’ answered the man, an old hussar who had carried Vàsàrhely in his arms off the field of Königsgratz, after dragging him from under a heap of dead men and horses.

‘A letter! To whom?’ asked Olga, who always was curious and persistent in investiga-

tion of all her brother-in-law's movements and actions.

Vásárhely had not laid any injunction as to secrecy, only as to speed, upon his faithful servant; so that Georg replied, unwitting of harm, 'To the Markgraf von Sabran, my Countess.'

'A letter that could not go by post—how strange! And from Egon to Wanda's husband!' she thought, with her inquisitive eagerness awakened. Aloud she bade the old trooper call at her palace for a packet for Taróc, to make excuse for having stopped and questioned him, and drove onward lost in thought.

'Perhaps it is a challenge late in the day!' she thought, with a laugh; but she was astonished and perplexed that any communication should take place between these men; she perplexed her mind in vain in the effort to imagine what tie could connect them, what mystery mutually affecting them could lie beneath the secret of Vassia Kazán.

When, on the morrow, she heard at Court that the Emperor was deeply incensed at the caprice and disrespect of the Count von Idrac, as he was called at Court, who, at the eleventh hour, had declined a mission already accepted by him, and of which the offer had been in itself an unprecedented mark of honour and

confidence, her swift sagacity instantly associated the action, apparently so excuseless and inexcusable, with the letter sent up from Taróc. It was still as great a mystery to her as it had been before what the contents of the letter could have been, but she had no doubt that in some way or another it had brought about the resignation of the appointment. It awakened a still more intense curiosity in her, but she was too wise to whisper her suspicion to anyone. To her friends at the Court she said, with laughter : ‘ A night or two ago I chanced to tell Sabran that his wife would be wretched at St. Petersburg. That is sure to have been enough for him. He is such a devoted husband.’

No one of course believed her, but they received the impression that she knew the real cause of his resignation, though she could not be induced to say it.

What did it matter to her ? Nothing, indeed. But the sense of a secret withheld from her was to Mdme. Olga like the slot of the fox to a young hound. She might have a thousand secrets of her own if it pleased her, but she could not endure anyone else to guard one. Besides, in a vague, feverish, angry way, she was almost in love with the man who was so faithful to his wife that he had looked away from her as from some unclean thing when she had

wished to dazzle him. She had no perception that the secret could concern him himself very nearly, but she thought it was probably one which he and Egon Vàsàrhely, for reasons of their own, chose to share and keep hidden. And if it were a secret that prevented Sabran from going to the Court of Russia? Then, surely, it was one worth knowing? And if she gained a knowledge of it, and his wife had none?—what a superiority would be hers, what a weapon always to hand!

She did not intend any especial cruelty or compass any especial end: she was actuated by a vague desire to interrupt a current of happiness that flowed on smoothly without her, to interfere where she had no earthly title or reason to do so, merely because she was disregarded by persons content with each other. It is not always definite motives which have the most influence; the subtlest poisons are those which enter the system we know not how, and penetrate it ere we are aware. The only thing which had ever held her back from any extremes of evil had been the mere habit of good-breeding and an absolute egotism which had saved her from all strong passions. Now something that was like passion had touched her under the sting of Sabran's indifference, and with it she became tenacious, malignant, and unsparing: adroit she

had always been. Instinct is seldom at fault when we are conscious of an enemy, and Sabran's had not erred when it had warned him against the wife of Stefan Brancka as the serpent who would bring woe and disaster to his paradise.

In some three months' time she received a more explicit answer from her cousin in St. Petersburg. Giving the precise dates, he told her that Vassia Kazán was the name given to the son of Count Paul Ivanovitch Zabaroff by a wayside amour with one of his own serfs at a village near the border line of Astrachan. He narrated the early history of the youth, and said that he had been amongst the passengers on board a Havre ship, which had foundered with all hands. So far the brief record of Vassia Kazán was clear and complete. But it told her nothing. She was unreasonably enraged, and looked at the little piece of burnt paper as though she would wrench the secret out of it.

'There must be so much more to know,' she thought. 'What would a mere drowned boy be to either of those men—a boy dead too all these years before?'

She wrote insolently to her cousin, that the Third Section, with its eyes of Argus and its limbs of Vishnoo, had always been but an overgrown imbecile, and set her woman's wits to accomplish what the Third Section had failed to

do for her. So much she thought of it that the name seemed forced into her very brain ; she seemed to hear every one saying — ‘ Vassia Kazán.’ It was a word to conjure with, at least : she could at the least try the effect of its utterance any day upon either of those who had made it the key of their correspondence. Russia had written down Vassia Kazán as dead, and the mystery which enveloped the name would not open to her. She knew her country too well not to know that this bold statement might cover some political secret, some story wholly unlike that which was given her. Vassia Kazán might have lived and have incurred the suspicions of the police, and be dwelling far away in the death in life of Siberian mines, or deep sunk in some fortress, like a stone at the bottom of a well. The reply not only did not beget her belief in it, but gave her range for the widest and wildest conjectures of imagination. ‘ It is some fault, some folly, some crime, who can tell ? And Vassia Kazán is the victim or the associate, or the confidant of it. But what is it ? And how does Egon know of it ? ’

She passed the summer in pleasures of all kinds, but the subject did not lose its power over her, nor did she forget the face of Sabran as he had turned it away from her in the ball-room of the Hofburg.

He himself had left the capital, after affirming to the minister that private reasons, which he could not enter into, had induced him to entreat the Imperial pardon for so sudden a change of resolve, and to solicit permission to decline the high honour that had been vouchsafed to him.

‘What shall I say to Wanda?’ he asked himself incessantly, as the express train swung through the grand green country towards Salzburg.

She was sitting on the lake terrace with the Princess, when a telegram from her cousin Kunst was brought to her. Bela and Gela were playing near with squadrons of painted cuirassiers, and the great dogs were lying on the marble pavement at her feet. It was a golden close to a sunless but fine day; the snow peaks were growing rosy as the sun shone for an instant behind the Venediger range, and the lake was calm and still and green, one little boat going noiselessly across it from the Holy Isle to the further side.

‘What a pity to leave it all!’ she thought as she took the telegram.

The Minister’s message was curt and angered:

‘Your husband has resigned; he makes himself and me ridiculous. Unable to guess his

motive, I am troubled and embarrassed beyond expression.'

The other, from Sabran, said simply : ' I am coming home. I give up Russia.'

' Any bad news ? ' the Princess asked, seeing the seriousness of her face. Her niece rose and gave her the papers.

' Is René mad ! ' she exclaimed as she read. His wife, who was startled and dismayed at the affront to her cousin and to her sovereign, yet had been unable to repress a movement of personal gladness, hastened to say in his defence :

' Be sure he has some grave, good reason, dear mother. He knows the world too well to commit a folly. Unexplained, it looks strange, certainly ; but he will be home to-night or in the early morning ; then we shall know ; and be sure we shall find him right.'

' Right ! ' echoed the Princess, lifting the little girl who was her namesake off her knee, a child white as a snowdrop, with golden curls, who looked as if she had come out of a band of Correggio's baby angels.

' He is always right,' said his wife, with a gesture towards Bela, who had paused in his play to listen, with a leaden cuirassier of the guard suspended in the air.

' You are an admirable wife, Wanda,' said

the Princess, with extreme displeasure on her delicate features. 'You defend your lord when through him you are probably *brouillée* with your Sovereign for life.'

She added, her voice tremulous with astonishment and anger: 'It is a caprice, an insolence, that no Sovereign and no minister could pardon. I am most truly your husband's friend, but I can conceive no possible excuse for such a change at the very last moment in a matter of such vast importance.'

'Let us wait, dear mother,' said Wanda softly. 'It is not you who would condemn René unheard?'

'But such a breach of etiquette! What explanation can ever annul it?'

'Perhaps none. I know it is a very grave offence that he has committed, and yet I cannot help being happy,' said his wife with a smile, as she lifted up the little Ottilie, and murmured over the child's fair curls, 'Ah, my dear little dove! We are not going to Russia after all. You little birds will not leave your nest!'

'Bela is not going to the snow palace?' said he, whose ears were very quick, and to whom his attendants had told marvellous narratives of an utterly imaginary Russia.

'No; are not you glad, my dear?'

He thought very gravely for a moment.

‘Bela is not sure. Marc says Bela would have slaves in Russia, and might beat them.’

‘Bela would be beaten himself if he did, and by my own hand,’ said his mother very gravely. ‘Oh, child! where did you get your cruelty?’

‘He is not cruel,’ said the Princess. ‘He is only masterful.’

‘Alas! it is the same thing.’

She sent the children indoors, and remained after the sun-glow had all faded, and Mdme. Ottilie had gone away to her own rooms, and paced to and fro the length of the terrace, troubled by an anxiety which she would have owned to no one. What could have happened to make him so offend alike the State and the Court? She tormented herself with wondering again and again whether she had used any incautious expression in her letters which could have betrayed to him the poignant regret the coming exile gave her. No! she was sure she had not done so. She had only written twice, preferring telegrams as quicker, and, to a man, less troublesome than letters. She knew courts and cabinets too well not to know that the step her husband had taken was one which would wholly ruin the favour he enjoyed with the former, and wholly take away all chance of his being ever called again

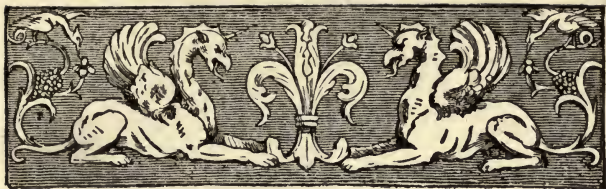
to serve the latter. Personally she was indifferent to that kind of ambition; but her attachment to the Imperial house was too strong, and her loyalty to it too hereditary, for her not to be alarmed at the idea of losing its good-will. Disquieted and afraid of all kinds of formless unknown ills, she went with a heavy heart into the Rittersaal to a dinner for which she could find no appetite. The Princess also, so talkative and vivacious at other times, was silent and pre-occupied. The evening passed tediously. He did not come.

It was past midnight, and she had given up all hope of his arrival, when she heard the returning trot of the horses, who had been sent over to Matrey in the evening on the chance of his being there. She was in her own chamber, having dismissed her women, and was trying in vain to keep her thoughts to nightly prayer. At the sound of the horses' feet without, she threw on a *n'gligé* of white satin and lace, and went out on to the staircase to meet him. As he came up the broad stairs, with Donau and Neva gladly leaping on him, he looked up and saw her against the background of oak and tapestry and old armour, with the light of a great Persian lamp in metal that swung above shed full upon her. She had never looked more lovely to him than as she stood so, her

eyes eagerly searching the dim shadow for him, and the loose white folds embroidered in silk with pale roses flowing downward from her throat to her feet. He drew her within her chamber, and took her in his arms with a passionate gesture.

‘Let us forget everything,’ he murmured, ‘except that we have been parted nearly a month!’





CHAPTER XXV.

IN the morning, after breakfast in the little Saxe room, she said to him with gentle firmness: ‘Réné, you must tell me now—why have you refused Russia?’

He had known that the question must come, and all the way on his homeward journey he had been revolving in his mind the answer he would give to it. He was very pale, but otherwise he betrayed no agitation as he turned and looked at her.

‘That is what I cannot tell you,’ he replied.

She could not believe she heard aright.

‘What do you mean?’ she asked him. ‘I have had a message from Kunst; he is deeply angered. I understand that, after all was

arranged, you abruptly resigned the Russian mission. I ask your reasons. It is a very grave step to have taken. I suppose your motives must be very strong ones?’

‘They are so,’ said Sabran; and he continued in the forced and measured tone of one who recites what he has taught himself to say: ‘It is quite natural that your cousin Kunst should be offended; the Emperor also. You perhaps will be the same when I say to you that I cannot tell you, as I cannot tell them, the grounds of my withdrawal. Perhaps you, like them, will not forgive it.’

Her nostrils dilated and her breast heaved: she was startled, mortified, amazed. ‘You do not choose to tell *me*!’ she said in stupefaction.

‘I cannot tell you.’

She gazed at him with the first bitterness of wrath that he had ever seen upon her face. She had been used to perfect submission of others all her life. She had the blood in her of stern princes, who had meted out rule and justice against which there had been no appeal. She was accustomed even in him to deference, homage, consideration, to be consulted always, deferred to often. His answer for the moment seemed to her an unwarrantable insult.

Her influence, her relatives, her sovereign, had given him one of the highest honours con-

ceivable, and he did not choose to even say why he was thankless for it! Passionate and withering words rose to her lips, but she restrained their utterance. Not even in that moment could she bring herself to speak what might seem to rebuke him with the weight of all his debt to her. She remained silent, but he understood all the intense indignation that held her speechless there. He approached her more nearly, and spoke with emotion, but with a certain sternness in his voice—

‘I know very well that I must offend and even outrage you. But I cannot tell you my motives. It is the first time that I have ever acted independently of you or failed to consult your wishes. I only venture to remind you that marriage does give to the man the right to do so, though I have never availed myself of it. Nay, even now, I owe you too much to be ingrate enough to take refuge in my authority as your husband. I prefer to owe more, as I have owed so much, to your tenderness. I prefer to ask of you, by your love for me, not to press me for an answer that I am not in a position to make ; to be content with what I say—that I have relinquished the Russian mission because I have no choice but to do so.’

He spoke firmly, because he spoke only the truth, although not all the truth.

A great anger rose up in her, the first that she had ever been moved to by him. All the pride of her temper and all her dignity were outraged by this refusal to have confidence in her. It seemed incredible to her. She still thought herself the prey of some dream, of some hallucination. Her lips parted to speak, but again she withheld the words she was about to utter. Her strong justice compelled her to admit that he was but within his rights, and her sense of duty was stronger than her sense of self-love.

She did not look at him, nor could she trust her voice. She turned from him without a syllable, and left the room. She was afraid of the violence of the anger that she felt.

‘If it had been only to myself I would pardon it,’ she thought; ‘but an insult to my people, to my country, to my sovereign!—an insult without excuse, or explanation, or apology ——’

She shut herself alone within her oratory and passed the most bitter hour of her life. The imperious and violent temper of the Szalras was dormant in her character, though she had chastened and tamed it, and the natural sweetness and serenity of her disposition had been a counterpoise to it so strong that the latter had become the only thing visible in her. But

all the wrath of her race was now aroused and in arms against what she loved best on earth.

‘If it had been anything else,’ she thought; ‘but a public act like this—an ingratitude to the Crown itself! A caprice for all the world to chatter of and blame!’

It would have been hard enough to bear, difficult enough to explain away to others, if he had told her his reasons, however captious, unwise, or selfish they might be; but to have the door of his soul thus shut upon her, his thoughts thus closed to her, hurt her with intolerable pain, and filled her with a deep and burning indignation.

She passed all the early morning hours alone in her little temple of prayer, striving in vain against the bitterness of her heart; above her the great ivory Crucifixion, the work of Angermayer, beneath which so many generations of the women of the House of Szalras had knelt in their hours of tribulation or bereavement.

When she left the oratory she had conquered herself. Though she could not extinguish the human passions that smarted and throbbed within her, she knew her duty well enough to know that it must lie in submission and in silence.

She sought for him at once. She found him

in the library: he was playing to himself a long dreamy concerto of Schubert's, to soothe the irritation of his own nerves and pass away a time of keen suspense. He rose as she came into the room, and awaited her approach with a timid anxiety in his eyes, which she was too absorbed by her own emotions to observe. He had assumed a boldness that he had not, and had used his power to dominate her rather in desperation than in any sense of actual mastery. In his heart it was he who feared her.

‘You were quite right,’ she said simply to him. ‘Of course, you are master of your own actions, and owe no account of them to me. We will say no more about it. For myself, you know I am content enough to escape exile to any embassy.’

He kissed her hand with an unfeigned reverence and humility.

‘You are as merciful as you are great,’ he murmured. ‘If I be silent it is my misfortune.’ He paused abruptly.

A sudden thought came over her as he spoke.

‘It is some State secret that he knows and cannot speak of, and that has made him unwilling to go. Why did I never think of that before?’

An explanation that had its root in honour,

a reticence that sprang from conscience, were so welcome to her, and to her appeared so natural, that they now consoled her at once, and healed the wounds to her own pride.

‘Of course, if it be so, he is right not to speak even to me,’ she mused, and her only desire was now to save him from the insistence and the indignation of the Princess, and the examination which these were sure to entail upon him when he should meet her at the noon breakfast now at hand.

To that end she sought out her aunt in her own apartments, taking with her the tiny Otilie, who always disarmed all irritation in her godmother by the mere presence of her little flower-like face.

‘Dear mother,’ she said softly, when the child had made her morning obeisance, ‘I am come to ask of you a great favour and kindness to me. René returned last night. He has done what he thought right. I do not even ask his reasons. He has acted from *force majeure* by dictate of his own honour. Will you do as I mean to do? Will you spare him any interrogation? I shall be so grateful to you, and so will he.’

Mdme. Otilie, opening her bonbonnière for her namesake, drew up her fragile figure with a severity unusual to her.

‘Do I hear you aright? You do not even know the reasons of the insult M. de Sabran has passed upon the Crown and Cabinet, and you do not even mean to ask them?’

‘I do mean that; and what I do not ask I feel sure you will admit no one else has any right to ask of him.’

‘No one certainly except His Majesty.’

‘I presume His Majesty has had all information due to him as our Imperial master. All I entreat of you, dearest mother, is to do as I have done; assume, as we are bound to assume, that René has acted wisely and rightly, and not weary him with questions to which it will be painful to him not to respond.’

‘Questions! I never yet indulged in anything so vulgar as curiosity, that you should imagine I shall be capable of subjecting your husband to a cross-examination. If you be satisfied, I can have no right to be more exacting than yourself. The occurrence is to me lamentable, inexcusable, unintelligible; but if explanation be not offered me you may rest assured I shall not intrude my request for it.’

‘Of that I am sure; but I am not contented only with that. I want you to feel no dissatisfaction, no doubt, no anger against him. You may be sure that he has acted from conviction, because he was most desirous to go to Russia,

as you saw when you urged him to accept the mission.'

'I have said the utmost that I can say,' replied the Princess, with a chill light in her blue eyes. 'This little child is no more likely to ask questions than I am, after what you have stated. But you must not regard my silence as any condonation of what must always appear to me a step disrespectful to the Crown, contrary to all usages of etiquette, and injurious to his own future and that of his children. His scruples of conscience came too late.'

'I did not say they were exactly that. I believe he learned something which made him consider that his honour required him to withdraw.'

'That may be,' said the Princess, frigidly. 'As I observed, it came lamentably late. You will excuse me if I breakfast in my own rooms this morning.'

Wanda left her, gave the child to a nurse who waited without, and returned to the library. She had offended and pained Mdme. Ottilie, but she had saved her husband from annoyance. She knew that though the Princess was by no means as free from curiosity as she declared herself, she was too high-bred and too proud to solicit a confidence withheld from her.

Sabran was seated at the piano where she had left him, but his forehead rested on the woodwork of it, and his whole attitude was suggestive of sad and absorbed thought and abandonment to regrets that were unavailing.

‘It has cost him so much,’ she reflected as she looked at him. ‘Perhaps it has been a self-sacrifice, a heroism even; and I, from mere wounded feeling, have been angered against him and almost cruel!’

With the exaggeration in self-censure of all generous natures, she was full of remorse at having added any pain to the disappointment which had been his portion; a disappointment none the less poignant, as she saw, because it had been voluntarily, as she imagined, accepted.

As he heard her approach he started and rose, and the expression of his face startled her for a moment; it was so full of pain, of melancholy, almost (could she have believed it) of despair. What could this matter be to affect him thus, since being of the State it could be at its worst only some painful and compromising secret of political life which could have no personal meaning for him? It was surely impossible that mere disappointment—a disappointment self-inflicted—could bring upon him such suffering? But she threw these

thoughts away. In her great loyalty she had told herself that she must not even think of this thing, lest she should let it come between them once again and tempt her from her duty and obedience. Her trust in him was perfect.

The abandonment of a coveted distinction was in itself a bitter disappointment, but it seemed to him as nothing beside the sense of submission and obedience compelled from him to Vàsàrhely. He felt as though an iron hand, invisible, weighed on his life, and forced it into subjection. When he had almost grown secure that his enemy's knowledge was a buried harmless thing, it had risen and barred his way, speaking with an authority which it was not possible to disobey. With all his errors he was a man of high courage, who had always held his own with all men. Now the old forgotten humiliation of his earliest years revived, and enforced from him the servile timidity of the Slav blood which he had abjured. He had never for an instant conceived it possible to disregard the mandate he received ; that an apparently voluntary resignation was permitted to him was, his conscience acknowledged, more mercy than he could have expected. That Vàsàrhely would act thus had not occurred to him ; but before the act he could not do otherwise than admit its justice and obey.

But the consciousness of that superior will compelling him, left in him a chill tremor of constant fear, of perpetual self-abasement. What was natural to him was the reckless daring which many Russians, such as Skobelev, have shown in a thousand ways of peril. He was here forced only to crouch and to submit; it was more galling, more cruel to him than utter exposure would have been. The sense of coercion was always upon him like a dragging chain. It produced on him a despondency, which not even the presence of his wife or the elasticity of his own nature could dispel.

He had to play a part to her, and to do this was unfamiliar and hateful to him. In all the years before he had concealed a fact from her, but he had never been otherwise false. Though to his knowledge there had been always between them the shadow of a secret untold, there had never been any sense upon him of obligation to measure his words, to feign sentiments he had not, to hide behind a carefully constructed screen of untruth. Now, though he had indeed not lied with his lips, he had to sustain a concealment which was a thousand times more trying to him than that concealment of his birth and station to which he had been so long accustomed that he hardly realised it as any error. The very nobility with which

she had accepted his silence, and given it, unasked, a worthy construction, smote him with a deeper sense of shame than even that which galled him when he remembered the yoke laid on him by the will of Egon Väsàrhely.

He roused himself to meet her with composure.

She rested her hand caressingly on his.

‘ We will never speak of Russia any more. I should be sorry were the Kaiser to think you capricious or disloyal, but you have too much ability to have incurred this risk. Let it all be as though there had never arisen any question of public life for you. I have explained to Aunt Ottilie ; she will not weary you with interrogation ; she understands that you have acted as your honour bade you. That is enough for those who love you as do she and I.’

Every word she spoke entered his very soul with the cruellest irony, the sharpest reproach. But of these he let her see nothing. Yet he was none the less abjectly ashamed, less passionately self-condemned, because he had to consume his pain in silence, and had the self-control to answer, still with a smile, as he touched a chord or two of music :

‘ When the Israelites were free they hankered after the flesh-pots of Egypt. They deserved eternal exile, eternal bondage. So do I,

for having ever been ingrate enough to dream of leaving Hohensalras for the world of men!’

Then he turned wholly towards the Erard keyboard, and with splendour and might there rolled forth under his touch the military march of Rákóczi: he was glad of the majesty and passion of the music which supplanted and silenced speech.

‘That is very grand,’ she said, when the last notes had died away. ‘One seems to hear the *Eljén!* of the whole nation in it. But play me something more tender, more pathetic—some *lieder* half sorrow and half gladness, you know so many of all countries.’

He paused a moment; then his hands wandered lightly across the notes, and called up the mournful folk-songs that he had heard so long, so long, before; songs of the Russian peasants, of the maidens borne off by the Tartar in war, of the blue-eyed children carried away to be slaves, of the homeless villagers beholding their straw-roofed huts licked up by the hungry hurrying flame lit by the Kossack or the Kurd; songs of a people without joy, that he had heard in his childish days, when the great rafts had drifted slowly down the Volga water, and across the plains the lines of chained prisoners had crept as slowly through the dust; or songs that he had sung to himself, not knowing why,

where the winter was white on all the land, and the bay of the famished wolves afar off had blent with the shrill sad cry of the wild swans dying of cold and of hunger and of thirst on the frozen rivers, and the reeds were grown hard as spears of iron, and the waves were changed to stone.

The intense melancholy penetrated her very heart. She listened with the tears in her eyes, and her whole being stirred and thrilled by a pain not her own. A kind of consciousness came to her, borne on that melancholy melody, of some unspoken sorrow which lived in this heart which beat so near her own, and whose every throb she had thought she knew. A sudden terror seized her lest all this while she who believed his whole life hers was in truth a stranger to his deepest grief, his dearest memories.

When the last sigh of those plaintive songs without words had died away, she signed to him to approach her.

‘Tell me,’ she said very gently, ‘tell me the truth. René, did you ever care for any woman, dead or lost, more than, or as much as, you care for me? I do not ask you if you loved others. I know all men have many caprices, but was any one of them so dear to you that you regret her still? Tell me the truth ; I will be strong to bear it.’

He, relieved beyond expression that she but asked him that on which his conscience was clear and his answer could be wholly sincere, sat down at her feet and leaned his head against her knee.

‘Never, so hear me God!’ he said simply. ‘I have loved no woman as I love you.’

‘And there is not one that you regret?’

‘There is not one.’

‘Then what is it that you do regret? Something more weighs on you than the mere loss of diplomatic life, which; after all, to you is no more than the loss of a toy to Bela.’

‘If I do regret,’ he said, with a smile, ‘it is foolish and thankless. The happiness you give me here is worth all the fret and fever of the world’s ambitions. You are so great and good to be so little angered with me for my reticence. All my life, such as it is, shall be dedicated to my gratitude.’

Once more an impulse to tell her all passed over him—a sense that he might trust her absolutely for all tenderness and all pity came upon him; but with the weakness which so constantly holds back human souls from their own deliverance, his courage once again failed him. He once more looking at her thought: ‘Nay! I dare not. She would never understand, she would never pardon, she would never

listen. At the first word she would abhor me.'

He did not dare; he bent his face down on her knees as any child might have done.

'What I ever must regret is not to be worthy of you!' he murmured; and the subterfuge was also a truth.

She looked down at him wistfully with doubt and confusion mingled. She sighed, for she understood that buried in his heart there was some pain he would not share, perchance some half involuntary unfaithfulness he did not dare confess. She thrust this latter thought away quickly; it hurt her as the touch of a hot iron hurts tender flesh; she would not harbour it. It might well be, she knew.

She was silent some little time, then she said calmly:

'I think you worthy. Is not that enough? Never say to me what you do not wish to say. But—but—if there be anything you believe that I should blame, be sure of this, love: I am no fair weather friend. Try me in deep water, in dark storm!'

And still he did not speak.

His evil angel held him back and said to him, 'Nay! she would never forgive.'



CHAPTER XXVI.

ONE day in this winter time she sat alone in her octagon-room whilst he was out driving in the teeth of a strong wind blowing from the north and frequent bursts of snowstorm. Rapid exercise, eager movements, were necessary to him at once as tonic and as anodyne, and the northern blood that was in him made the bitter cold, the keen and angry air, the conflict with the frantic horses tearing at their curbs welcome and wholesome to him. Paul Zabaroff had many a day driven so over the hard snows of Russian plains.

She sat at home as the twilight drew on, her feet buried in the furs before her chair, the fragrance shed about her from a basket of forced narcissus and bowls full of orange flowers and

of violets, the light of the burning wood shining on the variegated and mellow hues of the tiles of the hearth. The last poems of Coppée were on her lap, but her thoughts had wandered away from those to Sabran, to her children, to a thousand happy trifles connected with one or the other. She was dreaming idly in that vague reverie which suits the last hour of the reclining day in the grey still winter of a mountain-land. She was almost sorry when Hubert entered and brought her the mail-bag, which had just come through the gloomy defiles and the frosted woods which stretched between them and Matrey.

‘It grows late,’ she said to him. ‘I fear it will be a stormy night. Have you heard the Marquis return?’

He told her that Sabran had not yet driven in, and ventured to add his hope that his master would not be out long; then he asked if she desired the lamps lit, and on being told she did not, withdrew, leaving the leather bag on a table close to one of the Saxe bowls of violets. There was plenty of light from the fire, and even from the windows, to read her letters by; she went first to one of the casements and looked at the night, which was growing very wild and dark. Though day still lingered, she could hear the wind go screaming

down the lake, and the rush of the swollen water swirling against the terrace buttresses below. All beyond, woods, hills, mountains, were invisible under the grey mist.

‘I hope he will not be late,’ she thought, but she was too keen a mountaineer to be apprehensive. Sabran now knew every road and path through all the Tauern as well as she did. She returned to her seat and unlocked the leather bag; there were several newspapers, two letters for the Princess, three or four for Sabran, and one only for herself. She laid his aside for him, sent those of the Princess to her room, and opened her own. The writing of it she did not recognise; it was anonymous, and was very brief.

‘If you wish to know why the Marquis de Sabran did not go to Russia, ask Egon Väsàrhely.’

That was all: so asps are little.

She sat quite still, and felt as if a bolt had fallen on her from the leaden skies without. Väsàrhely knew, the writer of the letter knew, and she—*she*—did not know! That was her first distinct thought.

If Sabran had entered the room at that instant she would have held to him this letter, and would have said, ‘I ask you, not him.’

He was absent, and she sat motionless, keeping the unsigned note in her hand, and staring down on it. Then she turned and looked at the post-mark. It was 'Vienna.' A city of a million souls! What clue to the writer was there? She read it again and again, as even the wisest will read such poisonous things, as though by repeated study that mystery would be compelled to stand out clearly revealed. It did not say enough to have been the mere invention of the sender; it was not worded as an insinuation, but as a fact. For that reason it took a hold upon her mind which would at once have rejected a fouler or a darker suggestion. Although free from any baseness of suspicion there was yet that in the name of her cousin, in juxtaposition with her husband's, which could not do otherwise than startle and carry with it a corroboration of the statement made. A wave of the deep anger which had moved her on her husband's first refusal swept over her again. Her hand clenched, her eyes flashed, where she sat alone in the gathering shadows.

There came a sound at the door of the room and a small golden head came from behind the tapestry.

'May we come in?' said Bela; it was the children's hour.

She rose, and put him backward.

‘Not now, my darling ; I am occupied. Go away for a little while.’

The women who were with them took the children back to their apartments. She sat down with the note still in her hand. What could it mean ? No good thing was ever said thus. She pondered long, and was unable to imagine any sense or meaning it could have, though all the while memories thronged upon her of words, and looks, and many trifles which had told her of the enmity that was existent between her cousin and Sabran. That she saw ; but there her knowledge ceased, her vision failed. She could go no further, conjecture nothing more.

‘Ask Egon !’ Did they think she would ask him or any living being that which Sabran had refused to confide in her ? Whoever wrote this knew her little, she thought. Perhaps there were women who would have done so. She was not one of them.

With a sudden impulse of scorn she cast the sheet of paper into the fire before her. Then she went to her writing-table and enclosed the envelope in another, which she addressed to her lawyers in Salzburg. She wrote with it : ‘This is the cover to an anonymous letter which I have received. Try your uttermost to discover the sender.’

Then she sat down again and thought long, and wearily, and vainly. She could make nothing of it. She could see no more than a wayfarer whom a blank wall faces as he goes. The violets and orange blossoms were close at her elbow; she never in after time smelt their perfume without a sick memory of the stunned, stupefied bewilderment of that hour.

The door unclosed again, a voice again spoke behind as a hand drew back the folds of the tapestry.

‘What, are you in darkness here? I am very cold. Have you no tea for me?’ said Sabran, as he entered, his eyes brilliant, his cheeks warm, from the long gallop against the wind. He had changed his clothes, and wore a loose suit of velvet; the servants, entering behind him, lit the candelabra, and brought in the lamps; warmth, and gladness, and light seemed to come with him; she looked up and thought, ‘Ah! what does anything matter? He is home in safety!’

The impulse to ask of him what she had been bidden to ask of Egon Vàsàrhely had passed with the intense surprise of the first moment. She could not ask of him what she had promised never to seek to know; she could not reopen a long-closed wound. But neither could she forget the letter lying

burnt there amongst the flames of the wood. He noticed that her usual perfect calm was broken as she welcomed him, gave him his letters, and bade the servants bring tea; but he thought it mere anxiety, and his belated drive; and being tired with a pleasant fatigue which made rest sweet, he stretched his limbs out on a low couch beside the hearth, and gave himself up to that delicious dreamy sense of *bien-être* which a beautiful woman, a beautiful room, tempered warmth and light, and welcome repose, bring to any man after some hours effort and exposure in wild weather and intense cold and increasing darkness.

‘I almost began to think I should not see you to-night,’ he said happily, as he took from her hand the little cup of Frankenthal china which sparkled like a jewel in the light. ‘I had fairly lost my way, and Josef knew it no better than I; the snow fell with incredible rapidity, and it seemed to grow night in an instant. I let the horses take their road, and they brought us home; but if there be any poor pedlars or carriers on the hills to-night I fear they will go to their last sleep.’

She shuddered and looked at him with dim, fond eyes. ‘He is here; he is mine,’ she thought; ‘what else matters?’

Sabran stretched out his fingers and took

some of the violets from the Saxe bowl and fastened them in his coat as he went on speaking of the weather, of the perils of the roads whose tracks were obliterated, and of the prowess and intelligence of his horses, who had found the way home when he and his groom, a man born and bred in the Tauern, had both been utterly at a loss. The octagon-room had never looked lovelier and gayer to him, and his wife had never looked more beautiful than both did now as he came to them out of the darkness and the snowstorm and the anxiety of the last hour.

‘Do not run those risks,’ she murmured. ‘You know all that your life is to me.’

The letter which lay burnt in the fire, and the dusky night of ice and wind without, had made him dearer to her than ever. And yet the startled, shocked sense of some mystery, of some evil, was heavy upon her, and did not leave her that evening nor for many a day after.

‘You are not well?’ he said to her anxiously later, as they left the dinner-table.

She answered evasively.

‘You know I am not always quite well now. It is nothing. It will pass.’

‘I was wrong to alarm you by being out so late in such weather,’ he said with self-reproach. ‘I will go out earlier in future.’

‘Do not wear those violets,’ she said, with a trivial caprice wholly unlike her, as she took them from his coat. ‘They are Bonapartist emblems—*fleurs de malheur*.’

He smiled, but he was surprised, for he had never seen in her any one of those fanciful whims and vagaries that are common to women.

‘Give me any others instead,’ he said; ‘I wear but your symbol, O my lady!’

She took some myrtle and lilies of the valley from one of the large porcelain jars in the Rittersaal.

‘These are our flowers,’ she said as she gave them to him. ‘They mean love and peace.’

He turned from her slightly as he fastened them where the others had been.

All the evening she was preoccupied and nervous. She could not forget the intimation she had received. It was intolerable to her to have anything of which she could not speak to her husband. Though they had their own affairs apart one from the other, there had been nothing of moment in hers that she had ever concealed from him. But here it was impossible for her to speak to him, since she had pledged herself never to seek to know the reason of an action which, however plausibly she explained it to herself, remained practically inexplicable

and unintelligible. It was terrible to her, too, to feel that the lines of a coward who dared not sign them had sunk so deeply into her mind that she did not question their veracity. They had at once carried conviction to her that Egon Vàsàrhely did know what they said he did. She could not have told why this was, but it was so. It was what hurt her most—others knew ; she did not.

She felt that if she could have spoken to Sabran of it, the matter would have become wholly indifferent to her ; but the obligation of reticence, the sense of separation which it involved, oppressed her greatly. She was also haunted by the memory of the enmity which existed between these men, whose names were so strangely coupled in the anonymous counsel given her.

She stayed long in her oratory that night, seeking vainly for calmness and patience under this temptation ; seeking beyond all things for strength to put the poison of it wholly from her mind. She dreaded lest it should render her irritable and suspicious. She reproached herself for having been guilty of even so much insinuation of rebuke to him as her words with the flower had carried in them. She had ideas of the duties of a woman to her husband widely different to those which prevail in the

world. She allowed herself neither irritation nor irony against him. 'When the thoughts rebel, the acts soon revolt,' she was wont to say to herself, and even in her thoughts she would never blame him.

Prayer, even if it have no other issue or effect, rarely fails to tranquillise and fortify the heart which is lifted up ever so vaguely in search of a superhuman aid. She left her oratory strengthened and calmed, resolved in no way to allow such partial success to their unknown foe as would be given if the treacherous warning brought any suspicion or bitterness to her mind. She passed through the open archway in the wall which divided his rooms from hers, and looked at him where he lay already asleep upon his bed, early fatigued by the long cold drive from which he had returned at nightfall. He was never more handsome than sleeping calmly thus, with the mellow light of a distant lamp reaching the fairness of his face. She looked at him with all her heart in her eyes; then stooped and kissed him without awaking him.

'Ah! my love,' she thought, 'what should ever come between us? Hardly even death, I think, for if I lost you I should not live long without you.'



CHAPTER XXVII.

THE Salzburg lawyers employed all the resources of the Viennese police to discover the sender of the envelope, but vainly ; nothing was learned by all the efforts made. But the letter constantly haunted her thoughts. It produced in her an uneasiness and an apprehensiveness wholly foreign to her temper. The impossibility also of saying anything about it increased the weight of it on her memory. Yet she never once thought of asking Vasárhely. She wrote to him now and then, as she had always done, to give him tidings of her health or of her movements, but she never once alluded in the most distant terms to the anonymous information she had received. If he had been there beside her she would not have

spoken of it. Of the two, she would sooner have reopened the subject to her husband. But she never did so. She had promised him to be silent, and to her creed a promise was inviolate, never to be retracted, be the pressure or the desire to do so what it would.

It was these grand lines on which her character and her habits were cast that awed him, and made him afraid to tell her his true history. Had he revered her less he would probably have deceived her less. Had she been of a less noble temperament she would also probably have been much less easy to deceive.

Her health was at this time languid, and more uncertain than usual, and the two lines of the letter were often present to her thoughts, tormenting her with idle conjecture, painful doubt, none the less painful because it could take no definite shape. Sometimes when she was not well enough to accompany him out of doors or drive her own sleigh through the keen clear winter air, she sat doing nothing, and thinking only of this thing, in the same room, with the same smell of violets about her, musing on what it might by any possibility mean. Any secret was safe with Egon, but then since the anonymous writer was in possession of it the secret was not only his. She wondered sometimes in terror whether it could be anything that might

in after years affect her children's future, and then as rapidly discarded the bare thought as so much dishonour to their father. 'It is only because I am now nervous and impressionable,' she said to herself, 'that this folly takes such a hold upon me. When I am well again I shall not think of it. Who is it says of anonymous letters that they are like "*les immondices des rues: il faut boucher le nez, tourner la tête et passer outre*"?'

But '*les immondices*' spoiled the odours of the new year violets to her.

In the early spring of the year she gave birth to another son. She suffered more than she had ever done before, and recovered less quickly. The child was like all the others, fair, vigorous, and full of health. She wished to give him her husband's name, but Sabran so strenuously opposed the idea that she yielded, and named him after her brother Victor, who had fallen at Magenta.

There were the usual rejoicings throughout the estates, rejoicings that were the outcome of genuine affection and fealty to the race of Szalras, whose hold on the people of the Tauern had resisted all the revolutionary movements of the earlier part of the century, and had fast root in the hearts of the staunch and conservative mountaineers. But for the first time as

she heard the hearty '*Hoch!*' of the assembled peasantry echoing beneath her windows, and the salvos fired from the old culverins on the keep, a certain fear mingled with her maternal pride, and she thought: 'Will the people love them as well twenty years hence, fifty years hence, when I shall be no more? Will my memory be any shield to them? Will the traditions of our race outlast the devouring changes of the world?'

Meantime the Princess, happy and smiling, showed the little new-born noble to the stalwart chamois hunters, the comely farmers and fishermen, the clear-eyed stout-limbed shepherds and labourers gathered bareheaded round the Schloss.

Bela stood by contemplating the crowd he knew so well; he did not see why they should cheer any other child beside himself. He stood with his little velvet cap in his hand, because he was always told to do so, but he felt very inclined to put it on; if his father had not been present there he would have done so.

'If I have ever so many brothers,' he said at last thoughtfully to Greswold, who was by his side, 'it will not make any difference, will it? I shall always be *the* one?'

'What do you mean?' asked the physician.

'They will none of them be like me? They

will none of them be as great as I am? Not if I have twenty?’

‘You will be always the eldest son, of course,’ said the old man, repressing a smile. ‘Yes; you will be their head, their chief, their leading spirit; but for that reason you will have much more expected of you than will be expected of them; you will have to learn much more, and try to be always good. Do you follow me, Count Bela?’

Bela’s little rosy mouth shut itself up contemptuously. ‘I shall be always the eldest, and I shall do whatever I like. I do not see why they want any others than me.’

‘You will not do always what you like, Count Bela.’

‘Who shall prevent me?’

‘The law, which you will have to obey like everyone else.’

‘I shall make the laws when I am a little older,’ said Bela. ‘And they will be for my brothers and all the people, but not for me. I shall do what I like.’

‘That will be very ungenerous,’ said Greswold, quietly. ‘Your mother, the Countess, is very different. She is stern to herself, and indulgent to all others. That is why she is beloved. If you will think of yourself so much when you are grown up, you will be hated.’

Bela flushed a little guiltily and angrily.

‘That will not matter,’ he said sturdily. ‘I shall please myself always.’

‘And be unkind to your brothers?’

‘Not if they do what I tell them; I will be very kind if they are good. Gela always does what I tell him,’ he added after a little pause; ‘I do not want any but Gela.’

‘It is natural you should be fondest of Gela, as he is nearest your age, but you must love all the brothers you may have, or you will distress your mother very greatly.’

‘Why does she want any but me?’ said Bela, clinging to his sense of personal wrong. And he was not to be turned from that.

‘She wants others beside you,’ said the physician, adroitly, ‘because to be happy she needs children who are tender-hearted, unselfish, and obedient. You are none of those things, my Count Bela, so Heavens ends her consolation.’

Bela opened his blue eyes very wide, and he coloured with mortification.

‘She always loves me best!’ he said haughtily. ‘She always will!’

‘That will depend on yourself, my little lord,’ said Greswold, with a significance which was not lost on the quick intelligence of the child; and he never forgot this day when his brother Victor was shown to the people.

‘There will be no lack of heirs to Hohen-szalras,’ said the Princess meanwhile to his father.

He thought as he heard :

‘And if ever she know she can break her marriage like a rotten thread ! Those boys can all be made as nameless as I was ! Would she do it ? Perhaps not, for the children’s sake. God knows—she might change even to them ; she might hate them as she loves them now, because they are mine.’

Even as he sat beside her couch with her hand in his these thoughts pursued and haunted him. Remorse and fear consumed him. When she looked at the blue eyes of her new-born son, and said to him with a happy smile : ‘He will be just as much like you as the others are,’ he could only think with a burning sense of shame, ‘Like me ! like a traitor ! like a liar ! like a thief !’—and the faces of these children seemed to him like those of avenging angels.

He thought with irrepressible agony of the fact that her country’s laws would divorce her from him if she chose, did ever the truth come to her ear. He had always known this indeed, as he had known all the other risks he ran in doing what he did. But it had been far away, indistinct, unasserted ; whenever the memory of it had passed over him he had thrust

it away. Now when another knew his secret, he could not do so. He had a strange sensation of having fallen from some great height; of having all his life slide away like melting ice out of his hands. He never once doubted for an instant the good faith of Egon Vàsàrhely. He knew that his lips would no more uncloseto tell his secret than the glaciers yonder would find human voice. But the consciousness that one man lived, moved, breathed, rose with each day, and went amongst other men, bearing with him that fatal knowledge, made it now impossible for himself ever to forget it. A dull remorse, a sharp apprehension, were for ever his companions, and never left him for long even in his sweetest hours. He did justice to the magnificent generosity of the one who spared him. Egon Vàsàrhely knew, as he knew, that she, hearing the truth, could annul the marriage if she chose. His children would have no rights, no name, if their mother chose to separate herself from him. The law would make her once more as free as though she had never wedded him. He knew that, and the other man who loved her knew it too. He could measure the force of Vàsàrhely's temptation as that simple and heroic soldier could not stoop to measure his.

He was deeply unhappy, but he concealed it from her. Even when his heart beat against

hers it seemed to him always that there was an invisible wall between himself and her. He longed to tell the whole truth to her, but he was afraid; if the whole pain and shame had been his own that the confession would have caused, he would have dared it; but he had not the heart to inflict on her such suffering, not the courage to destroy their happiness with his own hand. Egon Vàsàrhely alone knew, and he for her sake would never speak. As for the reproach of his own conscience, as for the remorse that the words of his children might at any moment call up in him, these he must bear. He was a man of cool judgment and of ready resource, and though he had never foreseen the sharp repentance which his better nature now felt, he knew that he would be able to live it down as he had crushed out so many other scruples. He vowed to himself that as far as in him lay he would atone for his act. The moral influence of his wife had not been without effect on him. Not altogether, but partially, he had grown to believe in what she believed in, of the duty of human life to other lives; he had not her sympathy for others, but he had admired it, and in his own way followed it, though without her faith.



CHAPTER XXVIII.

LIFE went on in its old pathways at Hohenszalras. Nothing more was said by him, or to him, as to his rejection of the Russian mission. She was niggard in nothing, and when she offered her faith or pledged her silence, gave both entirely and ungrudgingly. Sabran to her showed an increase of devotion, an absolute adoration which would in themselves have sufficed to console any woman ; and if the most observant member of their household, Greswold, perceived in him a preoccupation, a languor, a gloom, which boded ill for their future peace, the old man was too loyal in his attachment not to endeavour to shake off his own suspicions and discredit his own penetration.

The Princess had been favoured by a note

from Olga Brancka, in which that lady wrote : ' Have you discovered the nature of his refusal of Russia ? Myself, I believe that I was to blame. I hinted to him that he would be tempted to his old sins in St. Petersburg, and that Wanda would be very miserable there. It seems that this was enough for the tender heart of this devoted lover, and too much for his wisdom and his judgment ; he rejected the mission after accepting it. I believe the Court is furious. I am not *de service* now, so that I have no opportunity of endeavouring to restore him to favour ; but I imagine the Emperor will not quarrel for ever with the Hohenzalrasburg.'

The letter restored him at least to the favour of Mdme. Otilie. Exaggerated as such a scruple appeared it did not seem to her impossible in a man whose devotion to his wife she daily witnessed, shown in a hundred traits. She blamed him still severely in her own thoughts for what she held an inexcusable disrespect to the Crown, but she kept her word scrupulously and never spoke to him on the subject.

' Where else in the wide world would any man have found such forbearance ? ' he thought with gratitude, and he knew that nowhere would such delicate sentiment have existed outside the pale of that fine patrician dignity which

is as incapable of the vulgarity of inquisitiveness and interrogation as was the Spartan of lament.

The months went by. They did not leave home; he seemed to have lost all wish for any absence, and even repulsed the idea of inviting the usual house parties of the year. She supposed that he was averse to meeting people who might recur to his rejection of the post he had once accepted. The summer passed and the autumn came; he spent his time in occasional sport, the keen and perilous sport of the Austrian mountains, and more often and more faithfully beguiled himself with those arts of which he was a brilliant master, though he would call himself no more than a mere amateur. From the administration of the estates he had altogether withdrawn himself.

‘You are so much wiser than I,’ he always said to her; and when she would have referred to him, replied: ‘You have your lawyers; they are all honest men. Consult them rather than me.’

With the affairs of Idrac only he continued to concern himself a little, and was persistent in setting aside all its revenues to accumulate for his second son.

‘I wish you cared more about all these things,’ she said to him one day, when she had in her hand the reports from the mines of

Galicia. He answered angrily, 'I have no right to them. They are not mine. If you chose to give them all away to the Crown I should say nothing.'

'Not even for the children's sake?'

'No : you would be entirely justified if you liked to give the children nothing.'

'I really do not understand you,' she said in great surprise.

'Everything is yours,' he said abruptly.

'And the children too, surely !' she said, with a smile : but the strangeness of the remark disquieted her. 'It is over-sensitiveness,' she thought ; 'he can never altogether forget that he was poor. It is for that reason public life would have been so good for him ; dignities which he enjoyed of his own, honours that he arrived at through his own attainments.'

Chagrined to have lost the opportunity of winning personal honours in a field congenial to him, the sense that everything was hers could hardly fail to gall him sometimes constantly, though she strove to efface any remembrance or reminder that it was so.

In the midsummer of that year, whilst they were quite alone, they were surprised by another letter from Mdme. Brancka, in which she proposed to take Hohenszalras on her way from France to 'Tsarköe Selo, where she was about

to pay a visit which could not be declined by her.

When in the spring he had written with formality to her to announce the birth of his son Victor, she had answered with a witty coquettish reply such as might well have been provocative of further correspondence. But he had not taken up the invitation. Mortified and irritated, she had compared his writing with the piece of burnt paper, and been more satisfied than ever that he had penned the name of Vassia Kazán. But even were it so, what, she wondered, had it to do with Russia? He and Egon Vàsàrhely were not friends so intimate that they had any common interests one with the other. The mystery had interested her intensely when her rapid intuition had connected the resignation of Sabran's appointment with the messenger sent to him from Taróc. Her impatience to be again in his presence grew intense. She imagined a thousand stories, to cast each aside in derision as impossible. All her suppositions were built upon no better basis than a fragment of charred paper; but her shrewd intuition bore her into the region of truth, though the actual truth of course never suggested itself to her even in her most fantastic and dramatic visions. Finally she thus proposed to visit Hohenszalras in the midsummer months.

‘Last year you had such a crowd about you,’ she wrote, ‘that I positively saw nothing of you, *liebe* Wanda. You are alone now, and I venture to propose myself for a fortnight. You cannot exactly be said to be in the way to anywhere, but I shall make you so. When one is going to Russia, a matter of another five hundred miles or so is a bagatelle.’

‘We must let her come,’ said Wanda, as she gave the letter to Sabran, who, having read it, said with much sincerity—

‘For heaven’s sake, do not. A fortnight of Madame Olga! as well have—a century of “Madame Angot”!’

‘Can I prevent her?’

‘You can make some excuse. I do not like Mdme. Brancka.’

‘Why?’

He hesitated; he could not tell her what he had felt at the ball of the Hofburg. ‘She reminds me of a woman who drew me into a thousand follies, and to cap her good deeds betrayed me to the Prussians. If you must let her come I will go away. I will go and see your haras on the Pusztas.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘Quite serious. Were I not ashamed of such a weakness, I should use a feminine expression. I should say “*elle me donne des nerfs*.”’

‘I think she has a great admiration for you, and she does not conceal it.’

‘Merely because she is sensible that I do not like her. Such women as she are discontented if only one person fail to admit their charm. She is accustomed to admiration, and she is not scrupulous as to how she obtains it.’

‘My dear! pray remember that she is our guest, and doubly our relative.’

‘I will try and remember it; but, believe me, all honour is wholly wasted upon Mdme. Olga. You offer her a coin of which the person and the superscription are alike unknown to her.’

‘You are very severe,’ said his wife.

She looked at him, and perceived that he was not jesting, that he was on the contrary disturbed and annoyed, and she remembered the persistence with which Olga Brancka had sought his companionship and accompanied him on his sport in the summer of her visit there.

‘If she had not married first my brother and then my cousin, she would never have been an intimate friend of mine,’ she continued. ‘She is of a world wholly opposed to all my tastes. For you to be absent, if she came, would be too marked, I think; but we can both leave, if you like. I am well enough for any movement now,

and I can leave the child with his nurse. Shall we make a tour in Hungary? The haras will interest you. There are the mines, too, that one ought to visit.'

He received her assent with gratitude and delight. He felt that he would have gone to the uttermost ends of the earth rather than run the risk of spending long lonely summer days in the excitation of Mdme. Brancka's presence. He detested her, he would always detest her; and yet when he shut his eyes he saw her so clearly, with the malicious light in her dusky glance, and the jewelled butterfly trembling about her breasts.

'She shall never come under Wanda's roof if I can prevent it,' he thought, remembering her as she had been that night.

A few days later the Countess Brancka, much to her rage, had a note from the Hohen-szalrasburg, which said that they were on the point of leaving for Hungary and Galicia, but that if she would come there in their absence, the Princess Ottilie, who remained, would be charmed to receive her. Of course she excused herself, and did not go. A visit to the solitudes of the Iselthal, where she would see no one but a lady of eighty years old and four little children, had few attractions for the adventurous and vivacious wife of Stéfan Brancka.

‘It is only Wanda’s jealousy,’ she thought, and was furious; but she looked at herself in the mirror, and was almost consoled as she thought also, ‘He avoids me. Therefore he is afraid of me!’

She went to her god, *le monde*, and worshipped at all its shrines and in all its fashions; but in the midst of the turmoil and the triumphs, the worries and the intoxications of her life, she did not lose her hold on her purpose, nor forget that he had slighted her. His beautiful face, serene and scornful, was always before her. He might have been at her feet, and he chose to dwell beside his wife under those solitary forests, amongst those solitary mountains of the High Tauern!

‘With a woman he has lived with all these eight years!’ she thought, with furious impatience. ‘With a woman who has grafted the Lady of La Garaye on Libussa, who never gives him a moment’s jealousy, who is as flawless as an ivory statue or a marble throne, who suckles her children and could spin their clothes if she wanted, who never cares to go outside the hills of her own home—the Teuton *Hausfrau* to her finger-tips.’ And she was all the more bitter and the more angered because, always as she tried to think thus, the image of Wanda rose up before her, as she had seen her so often at

Vienna or Hohenzalras, with the great pearls
on her hair and on her breast.

A planet at whose passing, lo !
All lesser stars recede, and night
Grows clear as day thus lighted up
By all her loveliness, which burns
With pure white flame of chastity ;
And fires of fair thought. . . .

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.



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